

## **Professional Learning Community in a Middle School**

A Master's Action Research Thesis Proposal

Submitted by

**Jessica Potter**

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Debra Nitschke-Shaw, Ph.D.

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### Abstract

This study attempted to answer the question, “What strategies can middle school leaders use to foster a professional learning community that focuses on student learning?” I created a leadership group, the Curriculum Coordinators, who represented smaller teaching teams in the school. To gain an understanding of the teachers’ professional learning community perspectives each teacher was asked to complete an on-line survey. The first strategy involved developing a tool, a collaboration checklist, for monitoring collaboration within the Curriculum Coordinators’ teams. The team members rated how they as individuals collaborated and how the team collaborated. The second strategy was to provide meeting times and places for collaboration.

A schedule was created to release teachers from their classes so they could develop common assessments and discuss ways to improve student learning. Curriculum Coordinators received a strategy guide for running each meeting along with professional learning community articles to support their work. To determine the effectiveness of the strategies, all teachers were asked to answer identical survey questions as they had before the project started.

The collaborative checklists encouraged the teams to be reflective and it helped define the expectations for the meetings. The teams had very high collaboration scores throughout the action research project. The scores consistently reflected teams collaborated well. The survey results explained that teams are willing and eager to learn more about professional learning communities but lack the training and expertise to engage fully in professional practices. Teachers created and analyzed the common assessment results to identify what students didn’t know. Most teachers planned lessons and/or interventions to address gaps of student learning. As a result of their work, students were able to access the curriculum and learn from the re-teaching and interventions.

## Dedication

I dedicate this action research project to my daughter, Morgan, and my husband, Jake.

Their support and love is undeniable!

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### *Overview/Rationale*

What is the primary job of middle school leaders? There are thousands of job descriptions which include a variety of educational duties and management or organizational tasks. Of course those responsibilities are required to run a school but what drives and motivates schools?

According to the professional learning research, the primary job of administration is to focus on student learning. “The very essence of learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student” (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 3). This statement may seem simplistic and very reasonable without deeply understanding the professional learning community elements. Realistically, this is a daunting task because there is so much to balance and re-organize within a school system. This action research project answers the following question: “What strategies can middle school leaders use to foster a professional learning community that focuses on student learning?”

Why use professional learning communities as the vehicle to improve student learning? Research has shown that schools which use professional learning communities improve schools. “A broad even remarkable concurrence among educational researchers and organizational theorists who have concluded that developing the capacity of educators to function as members of a professional learning communities is the best known means by which we might achieve truly historic, wide-scale improvements in teaching and learning” (Barth, Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, Eason-Watkins, Fullan, Lezotte, Reeves, Saphire, Schmoker, Sparks, & Stiggins, 2005, p. 7). Who could argue with the founding elements of a professional learning community? A professional learning community builds and supports a mission, vision, values, and goals that focuses on student learning, defines collaboration as a critical component to improving student

learning, promotes common assessments and interventions, and encourages celebrations to appreciate the hard work of the staff. Who could argue with the professional learning community concepts?

The struggle building leaders have is knowing how to create professional learning communities in the school. Essentially, the building leaders need to motivate and inspire educators to change their approach to teaching, which if done correctly, may revolutionize a teacher's pedagogy. This is not a simple task or a task that can be rushed without immense thought and preparation. Therefore this action research project will attempt to answer how leaders can institute professional learning communities within their schools.

#### *Key Terms*

##### *Professional learning communities.*

Richard Dufour states that the term "professional learning community" has become common but the definition differs between with whom you talk. In the book, "Learning by Doing" the authors use several pages to illustrate their definition of a professional learning community. They describe it as a focus on student learning, developing a collaborative culture, the use of collective inquiry into best practices, action oriented, a commitment to continuous improvement, and results oriented (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 3). "It just makes sense that a school committed to helping all students learn at high levels would focus on learning rather than teaching, would ensure students had access to the same curriculum, would assess each student's learning on a timely basis using consistent standards with proficiency, and would create systematic interventions provide students with additional time and support for learning" (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, pp. 3-6).

##### *Leadership.*

The familiar definition for leadership is an individual's ability to work with others to accomplish some agreed-upon result. However, an educational leader must be much more dynamic. I prefer to use the definition of leadership offered by the authors of *Leading Every Day*. They state "The ability to use personal power positively to influence others and build commitment to the goals and the work is a hallmark of a good leader" (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles, Loucks-Horsley, 2006 p. 3). Education leaders inspire change by engaging in collaboration and best practices.

An educational leader has three very important tasks, according to the professional learning community model. These tasks include,

1. Initiate structures and systems to foster qualities and characteristics consistent with the school they are trying to create.
2. Create processes to monitor critical conditions and important goals.
3. Reallocating resources to support the proclaimed priorities.
4. Posing the right questions.
5. Modeling what is valued.
6. Celebrating success.
7. Confronting violations of commitments. ( Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 21)

Leadership is leading other leaders. "Obviously, administrators hold important leadership positions, but in a professional learning community the view of leadership is extended to include the teachers" (Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2002, p. 23). There is a cultural shift or way of thinking in leadership. One approach is to be top down and lead and insist teachers implement. The other approach, which I use as the leadership definition, is to lead leaders.

*Transformation leadership.*

This term relates directly with the above definition of leadership. One difference is that transformational leadership actually changes people. “Transformational leadership implies that effective leaders change the lives around them. They motivate and inspire” (Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2002, p. 23). Transformational leaders can be anyone in the school not just the building leaders.

*Collaboration.*

Talking together is not collaboration. Meaningful collaboration involves a shared goal where all parties work together to accomplish the goal. Anne Conzemius and Jan O’Neil authors of “Smart School Teams” define collaboration as something more than working together. “Collaboration is most effective when everyone contributes skills, knowledge, and experience in pursuit of improved results. Collaboration is a process we use to achieve shared goals” (Conzemius & O’Neil, 2002, pp. 10-11).

Meaningful collaboration has seven basic fundamental elements, according to the authors of “Getting Started”. These include,

1. Collaboration is embedded in routine practices.
2. Time for collaboration is built into the school day and calendar.
3. Products of collaboration are made explicit.
4. Team norms guide collaboration.
5. Teams pursue specific and measureable performance goals.
6. Teams focus on key questions associated with learning.
7. Teams have access to relevant information. ( Eaker, Dufour & Dufour, 2002, p. 13)

*Collaborative culture.*

A collaborative culture, as described by Robert Eaker, Richard Dufour, and Rebecca Dufour, is so much more than people working together to accomplish a task. A collaborative culture involves “Members who are called upon to be contributing members of a collective effort to improve the school’s capacity to help all students learn at high levels” (Eaker, Dufour & Dufour, 2002, p. 5)

*Mission.*

A mission statement is common in businesses, education, and in the political arena. But what is a mission statement? A mission statement answers, “Why do we exist?” In education it explains the fundamental purpose of the school. The mission provides a purpose for the school that guides all other matters (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Many, 2006, p. 23). The mission statement in a professional learning community answers the following fundamental questions:

1. What do we expect students to learn?
2. How will we know what students have learned?
3. How will we respond to students who aren’t learning? ( Eaker, Dufour & Dufour, 2002, p. 12)

*Vision.*

The vision statement is created after the mission is formed. The vision statement answers the question, “What must we become in order to accomplish our fundamental purpose?” A vision is like a map or a guide to get to the mission statement. “Vision provides a sense of direction and a basis for assessing both the current reality and potential strategies, programs, and procedures to improve upon that reality” (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Many, 2006, p. 24).

A vision statement is not a wish list but a focus on the outcomes of the essentials. School improvement plans, budgeting, and staff development are formed from the vision statement (Eaker, Dufour & Dufour, 2002, p. 14).

*Values.*

Value statements are usually formed after the mission and vision. The value statements answer, “How must we behave to create the school that will achieve our purpose?” Schools that create successful value statements don’t need prescriptive rules and regulations to guide the employees instead staff use commitments and covenants (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Many, 2006, p. 24).

*Goals.*

Goals help teachers determine if their work has been successful. Goal statements help answer, “How will we know if all this is making a difference?” Goal statements are composed of results oriented targets and steps to achieve their mission (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Many, 2006, p. 26).

*Intelligence.*

The term intelligence was first used over a century ago referring to individual differences in overall mental ability. There are wide-spread definitions of intelligence today. “Most layperson think of intelligence as practical problem-solving ability, verbal ability, and social competence” (Morris, 1993, p. 282). The accepted definition of intelligence, according to the authors of “Understanding Psychology”, refers to intelligence as the ability to learn (Morris, 1993, p. 619). For the purpose of this project I have chosen to use the latter definition.

*Common assessments.*

Common assessments are very different from the traditional exam or summative assessment. In fact, common assessments are used to determine how much of a skill has been learned at a critical point where re-teaching and learning can still occur.

Grade level teachers work together to build common assessments. Common Assessments are timely giving feedback on the extent of each student's learning. They are standards based; they help teachers answer the question, "How do we know if each of our students is acquiring the knowledge and skills we intended?" The assessments are formative; they are used as tools to identify where a student might be experiencing difficulty so that the student can receive additional time and support until he or she has mastered the skill. (Barth, Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, Eason-Watkins & Fullan, 2005, pp. 21-22).

#### *Norms.*

Norms are similar to ground rules or protocols for meetings. Teams write their commitments down and pledge to follow them at all meetings. Norms should be reviewed and evaluated to ensure all members are staying true to their commitments (Eaker, Dufour & Dufour, 2002, p. 41). The authors of, "Leading Every Day" characterize norms as a way to function. "Effective groups establish and follow certain ways of functioning, which we call norms" (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles & Loucks-Horsley, 2006, p. 225).

#### *Intervention.*

Interventions are used when a student is not learning the essential information. An intervention allows for more time and support to allow a student to be more successful. Interventions should be timely, direct, and guaranteed (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Many, 2006, 7p. 2). Any student who experiences difficulty should have access to interventions. The professional learning community's response to students who experience difficulty is

1. Timely. The school quickly identifies students who need additional time and support.
2. Based on intervention rather than remediation. The plan provides students with help as soon as they experience difficulty rather than relying on summer school, retention, and remedial courses.
3. Directive. Instead of inviting students to seek additional help, the systematic plan requires students to devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastered necessary concepts. (Barth, et al., 2005 p. 34)

### *Theoretical Framework and Background Information*

I have worked in education as a teacher and an administrator for over eight years. During the last eight years I was led to believe teachers who have been teaching longer have more experience therefore they are more successful teachers. My theory, although based on little data, has proven to be true in so many ways. However, this theory posed a difficult situation for me when I transitioned into administration. How do I motivate and inspire those who I admire and from whom learn? Should I be changing anyone or anything in the school if the teachers are the experts? Who am I? I have wrestled with these questions for a number of years until a veteran taught me a valuable lesson, which I will never forget.

I was discussing the inconstancies of grading with a veteran teacher three years ago. She was asking me a series of questions about assessments and how much each test should be weighted. It was after a series of questions that I realized she wasn't posing her beliefs on me but asking me for advice. It was at that moment I understood my role. I must be a continuous action researcher who facilitates change that promotes student learning.

The professional learning community model theorizes administrators have a very important role. “The ability to use personal power positively to influence others and build commitment to the goals and the work is a hallmark of a good leader” (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles & Loucks-Horsely, 2006, p. 3). Of course teachers want their administrators to agree with their educational philosophy but a good leader will inspire teachers to find value in the mission of the school.

### *Theoretical Underpinnings*

What is good leadership? Theorists have speculated leadership techniques and strategies that are the most effective. Before we can answer which strategies are effective we need to ask; What does effective look like? According to professional learning communities, effective leadership is based on data-based decision making. “One of the basic concepts of effective change leadership is data-based decision making. It helps you pinpoint problems and consider alternative solutions” (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles & Loucks-Horsley, 2006, p. 83). What do leaders do if the data conflicts with their own beliefs? Some leaders base their effectiveness on the four basic values all humans need.

There seems to be a universal human tendency to design one’s actions consistently according to four basic values:

1. To remain in unilateral control;
2. To maximize “winning” and minimize “losing”;
3. To suppress negative feelings; and
4. To be as “rational” as possible- by which people mean defining clear objectives and evaluating their behavior in terms of whether or not they have achieved them.

The purpose of all these values is to avoid embarrassment or threat, feeling vulnerable, or incompetent. (Senge, 2000, p. 412)

Theorists have made an impressive argument that leaders who guide schools with the above belief system will ultimately fail. The four basic values above all center around power and control. Is using power to lead effective? “Power can be defined as having great influence and control over others. Leaders gain it through positional authority and/ or by earning respect and developing a following” (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles & Loucks-Horsley, 2006, p. 11).

The dominant theory suggests that leaders are born to lead and people naturally follow them. “The dominant theory for many years was the great person theory. Leaders are extraordinary people who assume positions of influence and then shape events around them” (Morris, 1993, p. 591). Examples of dominant leaders were Washington and Napoleon.

What about environmental situations? Some leaders just luck out because they were in the right place at the right time. “An alternative theory suggests that leadership is the result of the right person being in the right place at the right time” (Morris, 1993, p. 591). Martin Luther King fits this theory because of his intelligent and dynamic presence but if it wasn't for the civil rights movement we may have never known his name.

Another leadership theory suggests that leaders must be transactional. They need to have a variety of skills. “According to the transactional view, a number of factors interact to determine who becomes the leader of a group. The leader's traits, certain aspects of the situation in which the group finds itself, and the response of the group and the leader to each other are all important considerations”(Morris, 1993 p. 591).

Leaders may prescribe to one or many different theories. I think it is important to choose the leadership style that fits the organization and the belief system that is already present.

Leaders should be cognizant of the various factors that already exist in schools. Schools that have had “tyrant” leaders may need a softer approach in order to build trust. It is equally important to judge the effectiveness based on the mission of the school. Leaders should ask, “How does my belief system compare to mission, vision, and values of the school? Does my approach or leadership style support the mission or does it hinder the school’s development?”

### *Assumptions*

I have several assumptions that may impact this action research. One, I believe that professional learning communities is the right approach to increasing student learning. I have formed this opinion from reading various books and attending professional learning community conferences. I am also influenced by the Superintendent and others in the Supervisory Administrative Unit (SAU) who have embraced the professional learning community model.

I also assume the staff will be willing to participate and that they also believe in professional learning communities. I presuppose the staff will have varying beliefs about professional learning communities based on the experiences they have had. I assume there will be some staff who do not want to participate in this study. I will create a comfortable environment to allow each person to choose whether to be a part of the study or not.

### *Overview of Methodology*

Of course the first steps of the action research project will be to gain direction and permission from the principal. I will also gather consent forms from those who choose to participate in the study. In order to answer the question; “What strategies can middle school building leaders use to foster a professional learning community that focuses on student learning?” I will need to try a professional learning community strategy. Since the mission and

vision of the school has been successfully done I believe the next professional learning community step is to ensure teachers have time and direction for collaboration.

First I will begin by forming a committee who will help guide the development of the collaborative effort. Together we will use best practices and data driven decision making to create a schedule for teams to meet. We will also provide direction by creating a strategy guide for teams which will outline the expectations for collaboration.

I will collect information to determine if this strategy is successful. Surveys, reflections in my daily journal, and committee feedback will determine the effectiveness of the collaborative effort.

#### *Research Question and Objectives*

The action research project answers the question, “What strategies can middle school building leaders use to foster a professional learning community that focuses on student learning?” The goal of this research to is incorporate a professional learning community strategy into the school and then evaluate the effect of the change. The change that was evaluated was collaboration.

#### *Contributions*

This is a worthwhile study for all leaders and for the school in which I work. This school has just begun to embrace the professional learning community model but has struggled with implementing the basic principles of a professional learning community. The teachers have asked for collaboration time and direction in how to collaborate. I believe this action research study helps the school because it gives the staff exactly what they have asked for, time and assistance in acquiring collaborative skills.

I also believe this study is important for all building leaders. So many good intentioned initiatives fail. Building leaders who believe in collaboration may need to know the strategies behind the implementation process before they can begin to implement.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### *Overview*

What strategies can middle school building leaders use to foster a professional learning community that focuses on student learning? The ever-changing educational field desperately needs leaders who can transform schools into learning centers that improve student learning. Before we can identify how leaders use professional learning communities to renovate education, we must begin to understand leadership theories and best practices which support effective leadership. Once administration has a strong understanding of effective leadership strategies they will need to analyze the elements of effective schools. A professional learning community promotes research based practices that improve student learning. Chapter two will walk the reader through the professional learning community practices that support student learning and the challenges leaders face while transforming schools.

### *Leadership*

Middle school leaders have a difficult charge. They must serve as a bridge from the elementary school to the high school; they are responsible for the success of every child that enters the building. Faced with a multitude of leadership theories and suppositions, principals endure a daunting task of questioning their own leadership approach. First, we must begin to define leadership. “One common definition of leadership is an individual’s ability to work with others to accomplish some agreed-upon result” (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles, & Loucks-Horsley, 2006, p. 3).

What is the role of the middle school leader? August Little and Suzanne Little characterized the middle school principal’s role as “the nation’s last best chance to make a

difference in the future of our society” (Little & Little, 2001, p. 2). A building leader’s responsibilities cannot be summed up in a typical job description due to the complex nature of the profession. In fact, August Little and Suzanne Little began a comprehensive research project aimed to identify characteristics of an exemplary middle school principal. The researchers found fifty-nine characteristics under the umbrella of six discreet roles that embody ideal middle school leaders. The six roles are:

1. As a person;
2. As a visionary;
3. As an instructional leader;
4. As a leader in an educational organization;
5. As a manager;
6. A school-community facilitator. (Little & Little, 2001, p. 12)

Robert Eaker, Richard DuFour, and Rebecca DuFour describe effective leaders as transformational because they motivate and inspire other leaders. “Transformational leadership implies that effective leaders change the lives of those around them” (Eaker, Dufour, & DuFour, 2002, p. 23). This theory requires a cultural shift in thinking from a traditional model of administrators leading teachers to administrators leading leaders. This mind shift will transform a school into one that shares and distributes leadership. Schools need to find leaders who bring out the best in others instead of a gallant tradition leader. “Schools continue to search for the charismatic, heroic leader who will single-handedly ride in to rescue a demoralized or inept staff” (Barth, Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, Eason-Watkins, Fullan, Lezotte, Reeves, Saphier, Schmoker, Sparks & Stiggins, 2005, p. 23). Rather than look for a hero who fits the “great leader theory” schools ought to hire a building leader who distributes leadership founded on best

practices and educational research. Schools which search for continued improvement need a leader who is a source of inspiration to other leaders (Barth, et al., 2005).

The role of the building leader in the middle school is critical as we examine professional practices which engage learners. Principals must remain focused to execute change within their buildings and in the lives of their students. A great leader builds a community which will thrive with or without his presence. “One of the greatest ironies in education is that it takes an effective educational leader to create a truly empowered people who are capable of sustaining improvement after the leader has gone” (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 191).

### *Transforming Schools*

Before we can begin to answer how leaders motivate and inspire change within the schools, we must first ask, “What needs to be changed?” There are countless professional development opportunities for teachers, teacher leaders, administration, central office, and even parents. What direction should an administrator move towards to enhance the current practices within the building?

To transform schools, we must identify our current status and where we ought to be. We have come a long way from when our schools were built much like an industry. “Most leaders in education inherited organizational structures and systems that were based on the old factory model” (Kaser, Loucks-Horsely, Mundry & Styles, 2006, p. 36). Administrators need to focus on professional learning communities to move out of this factory model and into a collaborative culture which focuses on student learning. (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles, & Loucks-Horsley, 2006). According to the Effective Schools research, effective schools which improve student learning have the following characteristics:

1. A safe and orderly environment;

2. Clear and focused academic goals for each student;
3. Frequent monitoring of each student's learning;
4. Additional opportunities to learn for those who struggle initially;
5. A collaborative culture;
6. Strong leadership; and
7. Effective partners with parents. (Dufour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 19)

Professional learning communities are built on those seven principles and more. But, should building professional learning communities be the focus of middle schools? The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2002) found the primary focus of the elementary and middle school principal is to lead learning communities (Barth, et al., 2005). In 2004, the National Association of Middle School Principals identified three key strategies to improve student learning. One of those strategies was to develop professional learning communities within the middle schools (Barth, et al., 2005). The National Staff Development Council implemented a set of standards to improve staff development that in turn improves student learning by identifying learning communities as the best professional development approach (Barth, et al., 2005). Professional learning communities may be the vehicle to transform schools because it focuses on student learning.

In the following section of chapter two I will identify the professional learning community elements, accompanied with leadership strategies to develop exceptional schools. The Change Theory will be addressed as it relates to motivating adult learners and the steps administrators must take to comfortably move staff along the transition road.

*Professional Learning Communities*

What is a professional learning community? A professional learning community has a single focus on student learning. High levels of learning for all students is the responsibility of all educators in a learning community. The staff members are encouraged to focus on student learning because they are driven by a clear mission and vision. Result-based goals are formed by the members of the organization which focus on student learning. Educators work collaboratively to identify what students need to learn. Teachers respond with strategic and timely interventions for students who do not learn the essential knowledge (Dufour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). In order to have a true professional learning community all of the above elements must be systematically incorporated into the school system.

*Mission, vision, values, and goals.*

Direction must be given for people to know how and when to follow. “A School cannot function as a PLC until its staff has grappled with the questions that provide direction both for the school as an organization and the individuals within it” (Eaker, Dufour, & DuFour, 2002, p. 3). Defining mission, vision, values, and goals is the first collaborative activity educators must tackle. “Engaging staff members in a dialogue to re-affirm their mission can be an important step in the improvement process; but transforming schools also requires that educators become clear about the vision, values, and goals that drive the daily workings of the school” (Dufour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 23). The mission, vision, values, and goals are the foundation for everything that occurs in the school.

Mission statements answer, “Why are we here?” They formally identify the school’s fundamental purpose. Educators need to know school’s purpose and be able to visualize the direction of the school. “We seek out and move toward that which we can picture. We are desperate for a clear mission” (Scarce, 2007, p. 25). In addition, the leaders should create a

shared statement of what the team strives to become. According to Scearce, leaders can quickly form a mission by placing a paper on the wall asking, “What are the major reasons for the development of this team?” Staff answer the question by writing their responses on a large paper. Groups of staff summarize the statements into three or four sentences.

Becky Dufour, a leader in the development of professional learning communities around the nation, was once a new administrator in a small school; Boons Middle School. Becky transformed Boons Middle School by engaging small groups of teachers in dialogues about the school’s past and present. She used the list to better understand the staff perspective. She boldly transitioned her staff from the past to determining what they wanted to become. She supplemented the conversations with research-based articles which began to mold the conversations around student learning (Eaker, Dufour, & DuFour, 2002).

Vision statements answer, “What must we become in order to accomplish our purpose?” The vision statement offers a sense of direction, much like a road map. “Effective leaders engage people throughout the organization in building commitment toward the shared vision that becomes the guiding force for all action” (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles, & Loucks-Horsley, 2006, p. 13). Vision statements must be created by the entity of the people within the organization. Successful leaders will inspire their employees to create a shared vision which is based on best practices and current research (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles, & Loucks-Horsley, 2006).

Values clarify, “How must we behave?” Value statements are compared to the social glue which guides effective schools. Scearce advises leaders to clarify mission and vision statements (Scearce, 2007). Values are like commitment statements because they describe how we will behave. Value statements outline how each member will contribute to the mission (Dufour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Rick Dufour has found many challenging experiences while

motivating staff to write value statements. He advises leaders to write clear, action-oriented value statements, "...we urge schools to identify value statements as 'core commitments' to behave in certain ways, rather than writing values as belief statements" (Eaker, Dufour, & DuFour, 2002, p. 86). The key is to remind staff that they are clarifying how they will behave and the commitment they will make for their students.

Goals clarify how the mission, vision, and values will be accomplished. Goals prioritize the professional learning community process. Goals are written to prioritize efforts and resources which work directly towards the mission of the school; all goals should be results oriented. "If we are truly going to transform our school into places where each and every student is meeting and exceeding standards, we will first need to shift our thinking to focus on the results we want, a concept that is quite foreign for most educators" (O'Neil & Conzemius, 2006, p. 9). It is recommended teams identify strategic and specific goals which are measurable, attainable, results-based, and time bound (O'Neil & Conzemius, 2006, p. 13).

*Focus on student learning.*

If you ask educators their purpose they will say, "To teach." In a professional learning community the primary focus of teachers is to ensure learning. The authors of *On Common Ground* present a compelling case for this cultural shift.

The institutions in which contemporary educators work were built upon the premise that the ability to achieve high levels of learning was reserved for the elite, and that schools served students and society best by sorting and selecting students based upon their ability to learn and their likely occupations. (Barth, et al., 2005, p. 12)

The argument was made that students were all diverse learners and therefore, sorting students into teachable and non-teachable categories was appropriate. In fact, in the 1950's,

dropping out of high school before graduation was typical. “They designed their institutions to reflect their basic assumption that intelligence was something you were born with, not something you acquired” (Barth, et al., 2005 p. 13). The theory students can only learn if they are from “intelligent families” thankfully is a theory that is not acted on in most schools. However, educators who accept student failure have yet to transition to a strong focus on student learning.

Peter Senge, author of *Schools that Learn*, offers a theory for moving schools from the traditional model to a successful school. Senge found that setting high expectations will directly relate to the success of all students, “High standards are important to assure that students receive better opportunities for educational success, but to insist that standards be set in the context of the school’s mission, vision, and capabilities” (Senge, 2000, p. 281). He implores teachers to act as stewards to collaborate together to improve schools by reflecting, studying, inventing, and rethinking curriculum so it always has a positive impact on student learning. As a result of this focus, teachers will spend necessary time with students who have greater needs, rather than categorize the student as a non-learner which was a common practice in the 1950’s. (Senge, 2000)

In a professional learning community, teachers commit that their fundamental purpose is to ensure all students learn at high levels. Once this principle is embedded into the culture of the school, we can begin to identify what we expect students to learn. In a professional learning community, teachers focus on the following questions:

1. What is it we want all students to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has mastered the essential learning?
3. How will we respond when a student experiences initial difficulty in learning?

4. How will we deepen the learning for students who have already mastered essential knowledge and skills? (Barth, et al., 2005, p.15)

Schools across the United States have felt state boards of education and legislature have more than enough control over the local curriculum (McEwan, 2002). Frameworks, outcomes, essential learnings, targets, competencies, benchmarks, etc., are just a few terms that are used to illustrate McEwan's point. With more and more microscopes examining educational practices, it's no wonder teachers feel over-examined and powerless. However, some teachers found outcomes provide a clear understanding of what must be taught. Although there may be some animosity towards local and state control, we cannot argue that highly effective teachers know the power of consistency and well-articulated student outcomes (McEwan, 2002).

Building leaders who inspire and motivate teachers to focus on student learning will transform the school. Teams of teachers will know exactly what they expect students to know and be able to do, common assessments will be used to benchmark progress, collaborative teams will analyze the assessments to determine interventions or enrichment activities, and best practices will be shared and reviewed to determine the best teaching approach (Eaker, Dufour, & DuFour, 2002). In the book *Learning By Doing*, the authors clarify steps for administrators to use when trying to move the school towards focusing on essential knowledge.

1. *Less is More.* Teachers already have too much on their plate, so if this appears like it is something else to add to their plate, they will resist and refuse to aid in the development of essential knowledge. Instead, have a team of teachers clarify eight to ten essential outcomes all students will be able to achieve by taking this course or subject. This will help staff focus on the big picture learning and serve as a guideline to develop a common understanding.

2. *Focus on proficiency, rather than coverage, in key skills.* With so much content to be covered, teachers will move quickly through learning objectives so to address all the frameworks or standards. This approach assumes every piece of knowledge is equal, which means teachers assume all standards and learning objectives are equal. However, some standards are essential and others are nice to know. Doug Reeves, a reknown educational speaker and author, makes a solid point for focusing on key skills in his book, *The Leaders Guide to Standards*, “focusing on essential skills, teachers prepare students for 80% to 90% of the content that will be addressed on state and provincial tests and provide them with the reading, writing, and reasoning skills to address any question that could appear. (Reeves, 2002)

Building leaders can utilize the approaches above to guarantee all students are learning in addition to ensuring all teachers are learning how to teach students. This cultural shift from teaching to learning is a critical step to improving schools. As leaders begin to persuade educators, it is imperative the change theory is understood by all. I will address the change theory later in the chapter.

### *Collaboration.*

Teachers naturally work in isolation due to the nature of the profession. Building leaders who walk from one classroom to the next will find different learning objectives, approaches, and assessments because each teacher has his/her own unique approach. In many cases, teachers are honored for their creativity and individual strengths which leads to a competitive environment with pockets of successful students. This model does not fit the mission “to ensure all students learn.” The only way we can ensure students learn at high levels is to engage teachers in

collaboration. “Educators cannot help all students learn at high levels unless they work together collaboratively... it is the norm for public school teachers in North America to work in isolation with individual teachers, like independent subcontractors, teaching discreet groups of students” (Barth, et al., 2005, p. 16). Peter Senge has found teachers who work together are far better off than teachers who work in isolation in the book, *Schools that Learn*, “A strong professional community encourages collective endeavor rather than isolated individual efforts” (Senge, 2000, p. 327).

Teachers who work in teams will do so much more than work toward a collective endeavor according to Carol Scarce in the book, *122 Ways to Build Teams*. She developed a list of what she calls, “Pay Value” or the benefits of working in teams. These team characteristics can be found in high performing schools:

1. Develops a shared vision of what the school could be like;
2. Promotes cohesion among staff;
3. Team energy becomes aligned and energizes;
4. Taps into potential of many minds;
5. Emphasizes what is important;
6. Focuses on high-quality results;
7. Achieves high-quality results;
8. Higher likelihood of implementation of new ideas;
9. Higher likelihood of buy-in;
10. Promotes real-world skills;
11. Models to students the power of teamwork; and
12. Creates a structure for a professional learning community. (Scarce, 2007, p. 5)

Although leaders can see the positive effects of teams, the reality is teachers are isolated; they have their own classroom divided by brick walls and hallways. Their schedule is packed and their time is limited. It is no wonder teachers work in seclusion. Leaders need to remove the physical and mental barriers of isolation to begin the collaborative process. According to the authors of *On Common Ground*, a building leader must do the following to increase collaboration:

1. Provide systematic embedded collaboration in routine practices.
2. Provide the structure and parameters to ensure that collaboration focuses on improving learning of both students and adults. (Barth, et al., 2005 p. 18)

Collaborative teachers learn better approaches to teaching which improves learning. They will share experiences, strategies, and approaches to enhancing learning for all students. Collaboration should be a global experience it is so important to make connections with other colleagues.

As teachers work together and, perhaps, visit each other's classrooms or develop global experiences in tandem, the students naturally begin to become aware of the connections in the curriculum and, sometimes, of underlying big ideas that are embedded into every subject. (Caine, Caine, McClintic, & Klimek, 2005, p. 130)

Teachers who work together on developing essential knowledge or outcomes will begin to weed out the unnecessary curriculum and engage students in the big picture or key learning concepts. "Collaboration is a critical component to education; it is a core value" (Anne & O'Neill, 2002, p. 10). Now, the first time teachers are asked to collaborate there may be some resistance. Like most employees in any organization, common practices include, "Nagging, bitching, and complaining," according to Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey co-authors of, *How the*

*Way we Talk Can Change the Way we Work* (2001). They remind leaders that complaining grows like a weed in organizations and has a negative effect on the workplace.

Complaining and wishing has its tiny virtues: it can allow people to let off steam; people can feel less alone in their disappointment, unhappiness, or resentment if they can find allies who share their negative characterization of something or someone. But it rarely accomplishes much more than this. (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, p. 20)

Therefore, teaming and collaboration must have a clear focus and negativity must be kept to a minimum.

Effective leaders will bring teams together for a clear and common purpose. According to the book, *Leading Every Day*, collaborative teams need a clear direction, “Professional Learning Communities establish collaborative teams that share a common purpose. They work together regularly to achieve their purpose” (Kaser, Loucks-Horsley, Mundry & Stiles, 2006, p. 37). These leaders will provide data and discussion topics such as essential learning objectives, common assessments, and interventions for students who didn’t learn the essential knowledge. Barbara K. Given illustrates this point in her book, *Teaching to the Brain’s Natural Learning Systems*. She says,

Students’ social needs compel educators to organize into school communities of learners where teachers and students can collaborate on authentic decision-making and problem-solving tasks. She continues to write about the need for teams to see differences as liabilities in order to embrace diversity. Teaching teams will inevitably argue and resist collaboration, but when given a clear purpose, teams will begin to embrace diversity because it adds a creative element as they work on a common goal. (Given, 2002, p. 7)

Valuable leaders help groups understand the definition of team. Teams need to identify a common purpose for their meeting and define what the team will do. “Working well together” does not begin to address the outcomes or the purpose for the team (Scarce, 2007). Leaders who motivate teams to create a common purpose for their meetings will help teams form a foundation for their future development. Scarce points out that teams have many stages to go through, but the first and most important stage is the forming stage where teams identify their purpose.

Leaders may understand the importance of collaboration but struggle with the strategies to bring teams together effectively. Conzemius and O’Neill require three cornerstones to developing teams. Productive teams have committed people who share a common goal, a clear task and purpose for meeting, and a process for decision-making and communication (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2002). A clear reason for meeting will help teams be more productive, which will help students become more successful. However, educational leaders must do more than provide a clear purpose; they must help teams become collaborative.

Teams that meet regularly to discuss student learning must have ground rules or norms for how they will conduct themselves during the meeting. Once we are assured that the teams have come together for a common comprehensible focus, we can begin to identify how the teams will operate. One principal in a rural country which had limited resources formed effective collaborative teams by requesting teams develop norms. Norms or ground rules became protocols for how each team would collaborate (Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2002, p. 41). Norms are like commitments which the team will monitor through addressing the norms at the beginning and end of every meeting. Administration can oversee the team norms by providing checklists which are turned in quarterly to reflect the teams’ commitment to the norms.

Administration should only provide feedback and encouragement or teams will feel Big Brother is watching their every move (Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2002, p.41). The following questions should be asked of teams:

1. Are we being true to our protocols?
2. Are we staying focused on critical questions?
3. Are we generating the products we are called upon to create as a team?
4. Are we meeting our goals? (Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2002, p. 42)

This technique will support teams and guide them through their meeting process because teams will be less likely to slip into negative talk and more likely to work toward their goals.

Embedding collaboration into the culture of school will take time. Leaders who learn from the research will ensure teams have a clear purpose for meeting, which is aligned with the mission of the school, and will guarantee teams have enough time and resources to meet goals. Of course staff will resist the new idea at first, but providing them with support will persuade them into collaboration.

#### *Interventions.*

Building leaders who foster a professional learning community will make certain that interventions are appropriate, timely, and beneficial for students. Collaborative schools which have a clear mission, vision, values, and goals and have indentified the essential outcomes will begin to identify interventions for students who have not learned the required material.

Remember, a professional learning community promotes learning for all students and puts student learning in the forefront. Therefore, the next step is to determine what schools must do if a student does not learn.

Using data to guide interventions will assure a greater rate of success according to the book, *Leading Every Day*. “One of the basic concepts of effective change leadership is data-based decision making. It helps you pinpoint problems and consider alternative solutions” (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles, & Loucks-Horsley, 2006, p. 83). Teams should use data such as common assessments, NWEA, or other normed tests, surveys, and observations to guide further instruction. “Assessment should be a catalyst for improved learning” (Barth, et al., 2005, p. 83). Assessments should be formative so teachers know whether they should re-teach, enrich, or provide interventions.

Students do not all learn at the same rate (Eaker, 2006). All students, much like adults, learn in different ways and take a different amount of time to learn. Educators in a professional learning community will provide whatever it takes for students to learn despite their learning differences. Assume your driver education teacher didn't buy into this concept and used initial assessments, with no regard to the individual learning styles, to assess whether you would receive a driver's license or not. Imagine cruising down the road feeling you have mastered the art of driving when your teacher takes out his or her notepad and requests you parallel park. Thankfully, this isn't a reality because driver's education works much like a professional learning community because they coach students through each failed attempt, rather than failing them.

Interventions should be systematic and fluid. Teams should have intervention plans which address specific skills that students need. Students should be able to move in and out of interventions depending on the level of learning. Some teams create flexible grouping at the end of the school day where students receive individualized support in small groups (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

Interventions need to be scheduled within the school day, but not during other academic times. Students should never miss other academic classes to catch up in one class. Students who are pulled from Math to get extra reading support will eventually need extra math support; the cycle will continue and the student will lose hope. Flexible grouping during a designated time where no new instruction occurs will allow students to learn without missing other learning opportunities. While some students are receiving interventions, others are participating in enrichment. This allows teams to focus on individual needs and promote higher learning for all students (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

Interventions have become common in the special education realm. Special education has created research-based criteria for interventions which include the following criteria:

1. *Systematic:* The intervention plan is school-wide, independent of the individual teacher, and communicated in writing (who, why, how, where, and when) to everyone: staff, parents, and students.
2. *Practical:* The intervention plan is affordable with the school's available resources (time, space, staff, and materials). The plan must be sustainable and replicable so that its programs and strategies can be used in other schools.
3. *Effective:* The intervention plan must be effective and available and operational early enough in the school year to make a difference for the student. It should have flexible entrance and exit criteria designed to respond to the ever-changing needs of students.
4. *Essential:* The intervention plan should focus on agreed upon standards and the essential learning outcomes of the district curriculum and be targeted to the student's specific needs as determined by formative and summative assessments.

5. *Directive:* The intervention plan should be mandatory- not invitational- and a part of the students' regular school day. Students should not be able to opt out, and parents and teachers cannot waive the student's participation in the intervention program. (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006)

Effective leaders will manage school teams to create a system of interventions which are systematic, practical, effective, essential, and mandatory because student learning is the school's focus and the responsibility of the teachers and leaders. Administration can use the special education approach to intervention as a guide to develop school-wide interventions.

#### *Celebrations.*

Celebrations are imperative to professional learning communities because they recognize members and/or teams who embrace the purpose and priorities of the school. "Celebration is a particularly powerful tool for communicating what is valued. Celebrations allow for expressions of both appreciation and admiration" (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, pp. 28-29).

Individuals learn through celebration and recognition. Psychologists will refer to this as conditioning. "Conditioning refers to the acquisition of fairly specific patterns of behaviors in the presence of well-defined stimuli" (Morris, 1993, p. 186). In other words, we are more likely to do something if we are rewarded. Humans actually learn by being rewarded. Of course educators are rewarded each week by a paycheck, but the motivation to continue working in a professional learning community must be recognized by their peers, parents, students, and administration. *Learning By Doing* offers the following suggestions and strategies for incorporating celebration into the culture of the school:

1. Explicitly state the purpose of celebration. Staff member must be reminded that celebration represents:

- a. An important strategy for reinforcing the shared purpose, vision, collective commitments, and goals of the school and district.
  - b. The most powerful tool for sustaining the improvement initiative.
2. Make celebration everyone's responsibility. Every staff member plays an important role in this process, not just an administrator.
  3. Establish a clear link between the recognition and the behavior. Recognition should be directly linked to specific behaviors which improve the learning experiences.
  4. Create opportunities to have many winners. Celebration can be detrimental if contributing staff are left out. (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p.30)

Building leaders will motivate and inspire teachers by recognizing collective efforts of those who work toward the mission of the school. Leaders may choose to do monthly recognition activities or personalized letters showing appreciation. It is also important leaders insist they are not the only ones giving their appreciation. Administration could begin a "pay it forward" approach to allow a chain of recognition to flow throughout the year.

### *Change*

The word change is a six letter swear word in education. Too often educational leaders force change initiatives upon teachers without carefully examining the change process each staff member undergoes. The school climate must be cultivated with time and resources to promote necessary change. Allison Zmuda, Robert Kuklis, and Everett Kline, the authors of *Transforming Schools*, advise leaders to avoid the four failed approaches to change. Too often leaders look for a quick fix without carefully examining the effects of their approach.

Two approaches are widely used to infuse change within the school system with limited success. The first is called the “Exposure to new ideas” proposal. For example, a teacher is sent to a workshop expected to return a transformed teacher. There are several reasons this proposal fails. One, the teacher wasn’t given any reason to change. He or she doesn’t know what wasn’t working or why people assume it needs to be changed. Two, there is little to no reinforcement to change. Without time to practice, support from teams, and feedback from leaders the change will never take hold.

The second approach, which typically fails, is called the “Encourage them to bring those ideas into their classrooms”(Kuklis, Kline, & Zmuda, 2004, p. 15). For example, teachers are asked to read an educational article and attend book chats with other colleges. The expectation of the teacher is to transform their style of teaching to align with the best practices articulated in the book. In order for this approach to be successful teachers will need a culture, which supports them with time, resources, and collaboration before any change will take place. Simply asking them to read and discuss the book is not enough to impact the classroom.

The third approach is called the, “Solicit anecdotal feedback from them on ‘how it went’ for reporting purposes”(Kuklis, Kline, & Zmuda, 2004, p. 15). After a teacher attends a workshop she or he may be addressed by administration with a simple question of how the workshop went. Effective leaders will engage staff in rich discussions linked to school improvement efforts and will monitor the impact on learning by evaluating test scores, conducting class observations, and using student work to show growth. Having a two-minute conversation with a teacher is not sufficient.

The fourth-unsuccessful attempt to incorporate change within the school is called, “Identify another innovation to move the work forward” (Kuklis, Kline, & Zmuda, 2004, p. 15).

This is similar to a New Year's resolution where an administrator deems that another year means another innovation. Which means teachers fail make a connection with the mission, vision, values, and goals of the school. The new idea is associated with a fad that will pass. Leaders who link the new effort to the school's mission and offer a continuous plan for improvement will ultimately provide an opportunity for perpetual growth (Kuklis, Kline, & Zmuda, 2004).

Michael Fullan is regarded as a leading expert in change theory. His book, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, is an essential read for all building leaders. Fullan maps out the natural change process all people undergo as they move through the change continuum. Fullan also provides strategies for building leaders as they begin to motivate and inspire staff through the change continuum. First we must begin to understand the change continuum or three phases of change. Fullan asks leaders to consider the three phases as any new idea is implemented. By understanding the three phases, leaders will be more effective because they will recognize the collective and individual needs of staff.

Phase One: Initiation, mobilization, and adoption. This is the process that guides change before the idea is implemented. Teachers who are given clear and practical reasons for the change, an opportunity to interact and collaborate with colleagues, support from administration and their union, and outside resources will move effectively through phase one and be eager for implementation.

Phase Two: Implementation and initial use. This is the process which begins to change the way things were done in the past. Teachers, who see the value or need to change are clear about the goals or essential features, understand the complexity of the task, and can understand the practicality of the program will adapt to the change efficiently and effectively.

Phase Three: Continuation, incorporation, routinization, or institutionalization. This is the process which the program is part of the culture and habit of the school. Teachers who can rely on the change being constant and systematic will inevitably embrace the program. (Fullan, 2007, p. 65)

It is critical that administration remember that change can be difficult for all teachers and educational leaders. However, an effective leader will provide clear reasons to change, resources to support the initiative, process to guide the plan, and be able to incorporate the change into the culture of the school.

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this research is to understand how building leaders can plan to systematically improve student learning by using the professional learning community approach to drive change within the school. Building leaders must understand the elements of professional learning communities and the research which supports each component. Forming a mission, vision, values, and goals which focuses on student learning is one of the first professional learning community steps. Creating a culture for collaboration, interventions, and celebrations will transform schools into professional learning communities. Building leaders must also understand the change process in order to support their staff through each phase of implementation.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### *Overview*

I used four tools to evaluate whether I successfully created a strategy for meaningful collaboration time, which teachers can use to produce common assessments. A researcher's journal, staff survey, collaboration survey, and focus group were used as indicators to assess effective elements of a collaborative culture. The participants are the teaching staff at the school at which I work if they volunteer to participate.

### *Focus of Inquiry*

Action research is a perfect tool to answer the question, "What strategies can middle school building leaders use to foster a professional learning environment that focuses on student learning?" Educational leaders across the country are faced with leadership approaches which are not always successful or do not address student learning. A truly thriving school which focuses on student learning incorporates the professional learning community core elements which serve as a foundation for all learning. Highly respected educational speakers address the importance of professional learning communities in schools. World renowned educational authors and action researchers commend professional learning communities for increasing student success. So why aren't schools across the country instituting professional learning communities as the most significant initiative in their schools? Where do you begin? How fast do you move? How do you know the school is functioning as a true professional learning community?

The goals of this action research project were to:

1. Determine the elements of collaboration which a school can begin addressing;
2. Identify strategies building leaders can use to develop a collaborative professional learning community.

This was a worthwhile study because educational leaders who become familiar with a successful process for establishing professional learning communities will be more likely to begin the process. When educational leaders know where to begin, how fast to move forward, and what success looks like they will ultimately improve the climate and culture of the school while improving student learning.

Why choose action research to answer this question? Federal and universal policies and procedures have not improved all of our children's learning, according to Richard Sagor (2005). Sagor explains that teachers are frustrated because they are told to improve learning by following state and federal initiatives, but teachers rarely see the impact on student learning.

It must be acknowledged that the goal of universal student success, a dream held by most teachers and an expectation now codified in state and federal regulations, has never been achieved on a large scale. To my knowledge, in the history of mankind, no community has ever succeeded in getting all its children to high levels of performance on meaningful standards- which is the current expectation of education policy throughout North America. (Sagor, 2005, p. 2)

Why do these initiatives fail? We cannot deny the fact that the ideas and goals behind the state and federal mandates have student learning in mind and the expectations are clearly defined to improve student learning. Why isn't this plan successful? First, teachers and building leaders weren't part of the mandates and played little to no part in the development of the policies. Secondly, educators weren't compelled to change because they didn't feel a connection between the initiatives and student learning. The people who know the learning needs of their students and who have direct contact with students never had the opportunity to aid in the development of the plans. It is similar to a car manufacturer never getting drivers' input when building a car.

Action research works because it is always relevant to the participants and the educators can observe the evidence of the outcomes. Richard Sagor saw a need for teachers to be the researchers so they would see the need to change.

Practitioners who engage in action research inevitably find it to be an empowering experience. When teachers have convincing evidence that their work has made a real difference in their students' lives, the countless hours and endless efforts of teaching seem worthwhile. (Sagor, 2000, p.3)

I have chose action research to help me answer, "What strategies can middle school building leaders use to foster a professional learning community that focuses on student learning?" I needed to be actively engaged in the process where I can observe changes in my colleagues. I won't be the first or the last person to research professional learning communities, but I am the first to examine the impact on my staff. Rather than read a piece of literature, which attempts to answer my question, I began to conduct my own research because I am the one that needs to improve and refine my actions.

The work done in this project assists effective change because I cannot deny my results. The data collection tools provide valuable tips to guide and sustain change within the school. For example, survey information tells whether an approach is effective or ineffective. A successful approach will be used to incorporate many future tasks, but an ineffective approach will be discarded to avoid future problems.

### *Setting and Participants*

The setting is a rural middle school located in south, central New Hampshire. There are approximately 580 students ranging from fifth to eighth grade. Six core teachers are at each grade accompanied by a grade level special education facilitator and at least two para-educators.

Seven unified art teachers work with the four grade levels allowing core teachers to have an uninterrupted planning period. In addition, the school has two guidance counselors, an equity teacher who works with students who have emotional handicaps, reading and math 'Title One' teachers, and four office staff. Two full time administrators (a principal and assistant principal) work with a part-time special education administrator to guide and improve the education for our students.

It is important to note, the principal has begun his first year at this school and I, the assistant principal, have been working in this role for four years. The special education administrator has been in the district for over fifteen years. There are thirty-four tenured staff and twelve staff members who have worked less than three years in the district. In 2008, the school hired four new teachers.

Educators follow the teachers' contract, which outlines an arrival time of 7:35am and a departure time of 3:05pm. School begins at 7:45 and ends at 2:20. This does not leave a lot of meeting time because their planning time is their own time, which an administrator cannot use for meetings. Para-educators arrive at 7:30am and leave at 2:30pm. However, they have morning and after school duty which doesn't allow meeting time. They do not have a prep time because they are needed in the Unified Arts classes.

One challenge for this research project was finding time to meet with the staff. Their time is limited and their day is full. The second challenge was choosing an effective strategy to implement a collaborative culture. We choose collaboration as the first professional learning community step because all other steps rely on collaboration. My principal is flexible and determined to help create a schedule which will allow for more meeting time for the educators.

The staff members have expressed a need for collaboration, so I anticipate my first task will be to create a schedule which allows staff to meet.

### *Phases of Inquiry*

It is important to keep a journal while conducting the action research project. Writing about each challenge and success helps identify appropriate next steps. It can also serve as an excellent reflection tool. This journal (see Appendix A: Research Journal), was used to reflect after each day.

The first step of the study is to meet with the administration to get permission to carry out the research. The plan should be thoroughly discussed and consent forms should be signed (see Appendix B: Administrative Consent Form). Planning a meeting time to discuss and answer questions helps the approval process. It is critical the administrative team understand the research project and have the opportunity to provide input. Confidentiality must be maintained at all times and individuals need to be assured that there is jeopardy to anyone's job if he/she decides not to participate in the study.

Meeting with staff to discuss the action research project is possible since all teaching staff attend Wednesday afternoon staff meetings. Addressing the timeline, phases of inquiry, and data analysis helps the staff understand their various roles. Consent forms (see Appendix C: Staff and Teacher Consent Form) are given to all staff working at the school so data is collected from all consenting staff members. It was important the consent forms are signed and returned before research began. Developing a focus group is the next step. Thankfully the Curriculum Coordinators already exist within the school however they lack focus. This group represents each grade level and academic area. The Curriculum Coordinators, with varying perspectives, offers steps and suggestions for incorporating professional learning communities into the school. The

team began by defining the term collaboration and identifying at least five observable and measureable traits of collaboration. A checklist was formed based on their answers and the professional learning community practices (see Appendix D: The Collaborative Checklist). This checklist is used to evaluate the Curriculum Coordinators' commitment to collaboration and the commitment of the teams with which they work. The team created a chart showing what they know, what they want to know, and what they learned about collaboration as members of a learning community. The monthly meetings are used to share collaborative strategies and goals for instituting collaborative time within the school. The Curriculum Coordinators uses the Collaborative Checklists in their team meetings, too.

The next step of the action research project is to meet with the teaching staff to identify their professional learning community knowledge. Staff are asked to complete a survey which is used to develop a baseline of what the staff know about professional learning communities (see Appendix E: Pre-Project Staff and Faculty Survey). The data from the survey and the Collaborative Checklist is analyzed and discussed with the administration and Curriculum Coordinators.

Next, the Curriculum Coordinators analyze the data from the survey regarding collaboration and meeting times. The survey results show what the staff knew before any change was implemented. The Curriculum Coordinators and I created a schedule and strategies for teachers to meet (see Appendix F: Collaboration schedule). The teams are given specific outcomes which are aligned with the professional learning community model and the collaborative checklist (see Appendix G: Meeting Outcomes). Teams use the meeting time to identify essential outcomes and form common assessments.

After the teams are given a schedule and a clear focus for collaboration time and time to develop common assessments, they are asked to complete the Collaborative Checklist (see Appendix D: Collaborative Checklist) after each meeting. At the end of the research project they are asked to answer the same survey as addressed earlier (see Appendix E: Pre-Project Staff and Faculty Survey). I compare the new responses to the earlier ones. Comparing the difference between the pre and post surveys reveals results about the collaborative intervention strategies used. I compare the data to my own action research reflections kept in the action research journal (see Appendix A: Researcher Journal).

### *Data Analysis*

Data collection gains reliability when it is triangulated. Richard Sagor (2000) has found validity in multiple sources. “When collecting and analyzing data, action researchers can do a great deal to ensure the validity and reliability of their findings by using a process called triangulation” (Sagor, 2000, p. 19). Triangulation refers to three different data sources within an action research project. For research to be justifiable, one needs to access different data points and perspectives. Tests, surveys, interviews, focus groups, journals, and other records are all data points which could be used in the triangulation process.

The staff survey (see Appendix E: Pre-Project Staff and Faculty Survey) is used before and after the intervention to determine each staff member’s growth in his/her understanding of collaboration. The Collaborative Checklist (see Appendix D: The Collaborative Checklist) is used after each meeting to chart the progress of the group towards a collaborative culture. Surveys are an excellent data collection tool because they are efficient and versatile. The staff survey serves as an excellent tool because it is clear, brief, and confidential. The Collaborative Checklist is used frequently to allow for consistency.

The focus group, Curriculum Coordinators, is the second piece of the triangulation process. The group's focus is to give define collaboration and institute collaborative processes within their teams. The teams use the Collaborative Checklist after each meeting to indicate whether their actions are collaborative. The Coordinators use their teams' feedback to guide further meetings. This data source also serves as a benchmark tool so we can track the progress of the individuals and the group's collaborative actions. Their point of view and unique perspectives provide insight into the data. The third data point is the journal entries or logs. Reflection can be a great tool because it can be used to jog one's memory or offer insight into the data. The journal is used to find patterns or themes. The entries include concerns, priorities, frustrations, and appropriate next steps. It is appropriate to go back and read the entries after the events.

### *Debriefing*

Once the research is complete, it is essential to discuss and review the findings with the participants. Each participant is debriefed about the action research process, the findings, and their individual involvement. Meeting with the staff, as a group and individually, to discuss the information will allow them an opportunity to review the material. Questions and concerns are discussed thoroughly and all viewpoints are considered. This step is just as important as the first because it concludes the information and builds trust with the participants. It is equally important to remind the participants the collected research can be reviewed at anytime, but will be shredded on the anniversary of the fifth year.

## Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

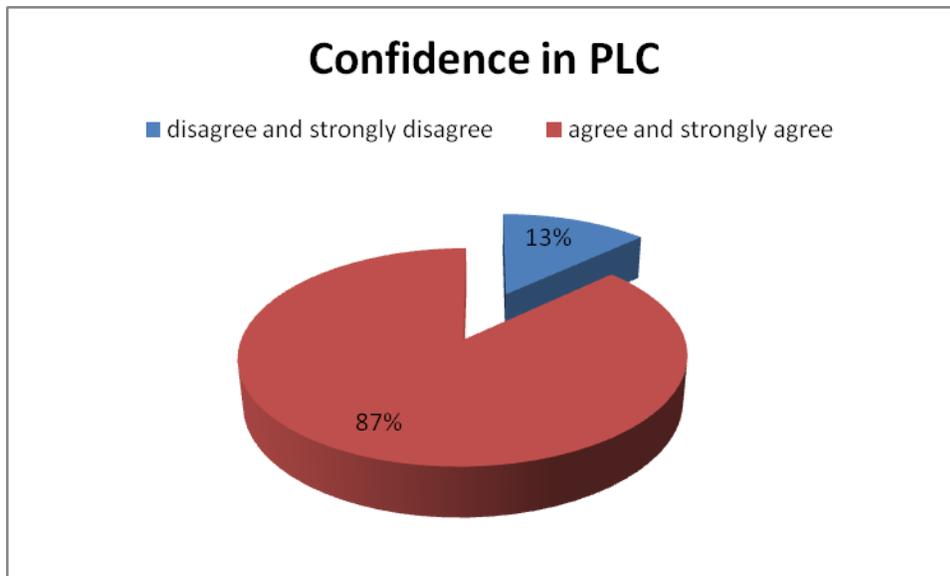
### *Results and Discussion*

Before I sent the teachers the consent form to complete, I met with the Principal and Special Education Coordinator to describe my action research proposal, and to gain their permission for the project (see Appendix B: Principal Consent Form). Both administrators had several questions regarding the process and time line for the project. They signed the consent forms and offered their full support. I planned to seek the teachers' sanction by organizing a Wednesday staff meeting to discuss the project at length, and answer any questions before handing out the teacher consent forms (Appendix C: Teacher Consent Form). Unfortunately, a Wednesday snow storm closed school so, instead, I sent out an informative e-mail explaining the project, and then placed the consent forms in each of the teacher's mailboxes. The consent forms were returned, and the study officially began.

To determine how people felt about collaboration before the study, I used a Pre-Survey (Appendix E: Pre-Project Staff and Faculty Survey). The survey was sent to all thirty-one homeroom teachers and Unified Art teachers in the school, however, only 23 responded (74% of the teachers). The survey results are thoroughly explained in the next section of this chapter.

The first question on the survey was designed to gain an understanding of the teachers' background in professional learning communities. The teachers used a four point scale to indicate their knowledge and understanding of the professional learning community basic elements. All twenty-three teachers responded to this question. Eighty-seven percent of the responses indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with the following question:

Table A: “I am confident I know and understand the professional learning community basic elements.”



The teachers gave mixed responses about collaboration with their team members. Teachers were asked if they felt they had sufficient time to collaborate with their team. Slightly more than 26% of the teachers reported that they do not have time to collaborate with their team. A majority of the teachers (46%) reported that they have enough time to collaborate with their team. I cross-referenced the researcher’s journal to gain a better understanding of these responses. The journal notes that four teams have six people and one team is comprised of four members who do not share a common planning time. One team had expressed a need to meet as a team daily. This team of four could account for the high percentage in the strongly disagree category.

Table B: "I have time to collaborate with my team"



I believe it is valuable to look at the responses to this question in another format. Table B shows a high percentage of staff who agree that they have enough planning time, but the researcher’s journal indicates otherwise. Table C combines the responses in two similar categories: agree and disagree. Note that the responses are almost evenly split between the staff.

Table C: Staff responses to time to collaborate

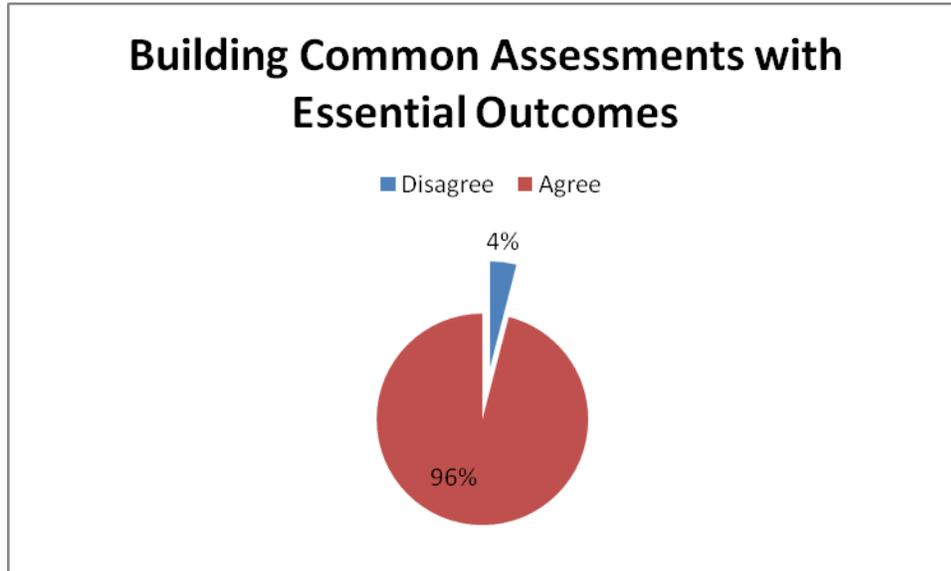


Question 4 asked the staff if they knew what true collaboration looked like. Twenty staff members indicated that they did. In fact, seven staff members strongly agreed they knew true collaboration when they saw it. Three teachers reported they did not know what true collaboration looked like. It is important to note that the three teachers who reported this also indicated that they knew the basic elements of a professional learning community. Similarly, all three surveys indicated that the teachers would like more training in professional learning communities.

The staff was asked if they had participated in developing essential outcomes for their grade level and curriculum area. Essential outcomes are what we expect every student to know and be able to do. The curriculum team's first task was to review the essential outcomes, because without the essentials, the teams couldn't build common assessments. The survey results showed that twenty-two teachers had participated in this process. One teacher reported he/she had not created essential outcomes. The researcher's journal indicated that every team had completed their essential outcomes.

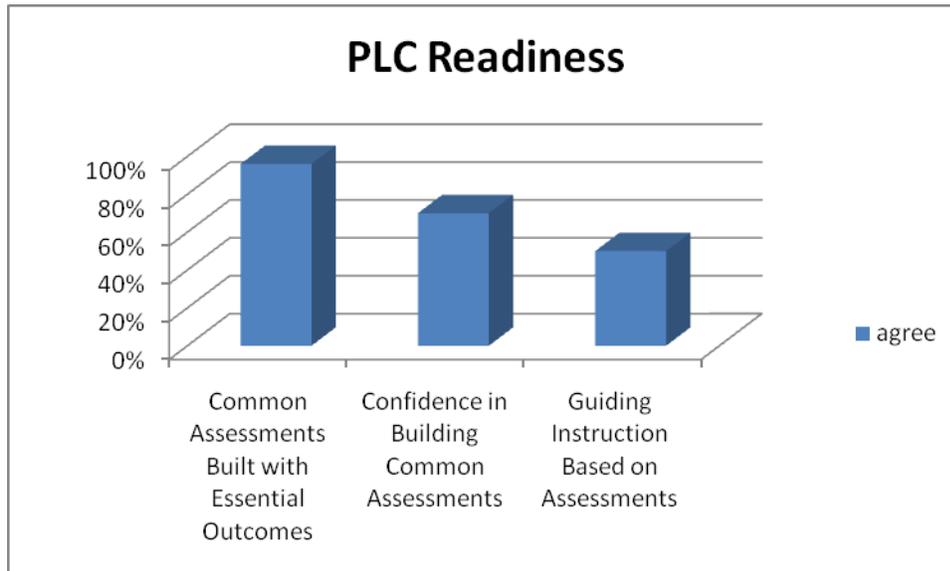
Ninety-five percent of the teachers indicated that they had used essential outcomes to build common assessments. One teacher reported that he/she had not used common assessments. It is important to note that the researcher's journal has a possible explanation for the high percentage of staff who answered "agree." According to the journal, three staff members questioned the wording of this question. They expressed some confusion about how one would answer "strongly agree" to a yes or no question. Therefore, it is valuable to analyze the data by looking at how many staff answered positively (agreed or strongly agreed) or negatively (disagreed or strongly disagreed).

Table D: "I have used essential outcomes to build common assessments"



The next question on the survey asked teachers to express their level of confidence in building formative common assessments. Seventy-eight percent of the responders indicated they do feel confident. However, three people (13%) reported they were not confident. Eighty-seven percent of the surveys indicated the staff is using formative common assessments. This is a slight decrease in comparison to the previous question. This data indicates the following question would have a similar decrease since the questions follow a professional learning community progression. Likewise, only 52% of the staff indicated that they have used formative common assessments to guide instruction. Table E shows how staff answered the last three questions. The researcher's journal explains a theory for the decrease in data. Each question is posed in the order in which work should be completed. Therefore, one can look at the data to determine where staff is in the professional learning community continuum; the table is essentially a readiness identifier.

Table E: Professional Learning Community Readiness



Question 8 asked teachers if they felt confident in the ability of their team to build common formative assessments. This question was developed to compare against question 5, which states, “I have used essential outcomes to build common assessments.” Interestingly, 96% of the staff said they have built common assessments (question 5); however, only 70% feel their team can build common assessments. Therefore, 26% of the responders indicated their team can not build common assessments, but as an individual, they already had done so. The researcher’s journal indicates every grade and curriculum area completed at least one common formative assessment as of February 17, 2009. The seven teachers who indicated lack of confidence in their team to build common assessments must be part of a team which has completed a formative common assessment.

Question 9 asked the staff if they know who to talk to about professional learning communities. Over 35% of the staff said that they do not know who to talk to about professional learning communities. Eight teachers reported they disagreed or strongly disagreed that they

knew who to talk to regarding professional learning communities. This data may indicate the staff hasn't had questions about professional learning communities but rather they don't know with whom to talk.

Question 10 asked the staff if they had attended a professional learning community conference. The majority of the responders indicated that they had not attended a professional learning community conference. Question 11 asked the staff if they needed more training or resources to support professional learning communities. Seventy-seven percent of the staff indicated that they did. Eleven teachers reported that they have been to a professional learning community conference (question 10), yet eight out of the eleven teachers still indicated the desire for more training to support professional learning communities. Table F shows the percentage of staff who wants training despite their professional learning community backgrounds. Table G shows the teachers who have been to a professional learning community conference, but still want additional training.

Table F: Comparison between Questions Ten and Eleven.



Once I reviewed the data from the pre-survey, I met with the Curriculum Coordinators to complete the next phase of the project. The Curriculum Coordinators were assigned a task before the action research project. Specifically, they were responsible for infusing the professional learning community practices into the culture of the school, which emphasizes the need for collaboration. Logically, this may contribute to the group's willingness to aid in this action research project. Each Curriculum Coordinator is responsible for a subject area and grade level. Yet, there are only two fifth grade Curriculum Coordinators because one focuses on math and the other focuses on reading. While fifth and sixth grade only focus on math and reading, seventh and eighth grade focus on all the subject areas. Accordingly, there is a coordinator for each subject at the seventh and eighth level including social studies and science.

All of the Curriculum Coordinators meet once a month with me, the Curriculum Coordinator Facilitator. Two Wednesdays a month Curriculum Coordinators meet from 2:30-3:05 with their own teams to continue the professional learning community work. I began this particular action research project because we quickly found that the teams were unable to accomplish their task in these short meeting periods. In addition, the Curriculum Coordinators expressed a concern for the lack of time and resources for their teams. This action research project attempted to resolve their concerns to allow for more valuable collaboration with a focus on student learning. After meeting with the Assistant Superintendent and the Principal, we were able to allocate money from Title IIA funds to provide release time for our teachers to work on professional learning communities. The Curriculum Coordinators were told they could each have four half days to work with their teams in addition to the Wednesday afternoons. The administration also supported using all of the previously scheduled early release days to focus on collaboration and building common assessments (See Appendix F: Collaboration Schedule)

The second task was to provide the Curriculum Coordinators with direction and resources. Giving the Coordinators a clear, observable, and measurable goal to which they all could agree was the first step. The Coordinators agreed to “Our goal is to create a formative common assessment to be used in each marking period, which assesses students’ knowledge of an essential outcome” (January, 2009). A strategy guide for achieving this goal was given to each Curriculum Coordinator as a resource, and as a tool for helping them and their teams work together (see Appendix G: Strategy Guide). To guide the work of the group, each Curriculum Coordinator was given the book, *Ahead of the Curve: The Power of Assessment to Transform Teaching and Learning* by Doug Reeves. At each Curriculum Coordinator meeting, a fifteen minute book review was used to address some of the key points in his book.

On February 12<sup>th</sup> I met with the Curriculum Coordinators to discuss collaboration with their teams. I asked each Coordinator to write, on a sticky paper, observable and measurable characteristics of true collaboration. Each Coordinator placed his/her sticky note on a poster entitled, “What Does True Collaboration Look Like?” Together, we agreed to six characteristics that exemplify true collaboration. In addition, the Coordinators completed a group chart asking what they know about collaboration, what they want to know about collaboration, and what they have learned about collaboration (KWL chart). The six collaboration characteristics were used to create a collaboration checklist to be used after each meeting of the Curriculum Coordinators and after each Coordinator meets with his/her team. The KWL chart will be used again in four weeks to analyze any changes in what they know, what they have learned, and what they want to know about collaboration.

I delivered the collaboration checklist to all of the Curriculum Coordinators who asked their teams to complete the checklist after each professional learning community meeting. The

checklists were then delivered to me after each meeting. Each team chose a number as a way to identify their team's checklists. I did not know which team had which number so their confidentiality was protected, but I was still able to follow each team's collaboration progress.

The collaborative checklists quickly became a daunting task for a variety of reasons. To create a confidential process to collect and review the checklists meant the process was slightly confusing. As previously stated, the teams chose their numbers without revealing them to me. After the teams met, they were to complete the checklists individually, place the checklists in their team envelope, and then place the envelope in my mailbox. I took the checklists from the envelope to analyze the data, and placed the empty envelopes beneath my box to be retrieved. This process was explained orally to the Curriculum Coordinators, and was printed on the back of the envelopes. However, Team 8 completed the checklist as a group, and did not follow the rating system. Teams 2, 5, and 8 only completed one checklist after two meetings. The Researcher's Journal captured a staff member's point of view regarding the checklists. "If you used Survey Monkey the teams wouldn't worry about confidentiality and the process would have been easier" (March 3, 2009). I agreed with the coordinator, but I was originally concerned that the team members wouldn't complete the checklists after the meetings if it was online.

Despite the confusion with the checklists, the data showed exciting information about the teams. I averaged the results from each checklist per team, and found the teams' averages to be very high performing, according to the collaborative checklists. In their first meeting, each team responded favorably, that their team allows each person to speak while others listen. Team 1 was harder on themselves as individuals than they were on their teammates, yet they still averaged a 3.3 which means the individuals in the team thought their team members listened well. Table G

shows each team’s averages for their first meeting. The team’s average is found under the column marked with a T, and the individual ratings are under the column marked “Me.”

Table G: Collaborative Checklists Meeting One.

|           |   | Team 1 |     | Team 2 |   | Team 3 |     | Team 4 |     | Team 5 |     | Team 6 |   | Team 7 |   | Team 8 |   | Team 9 |     |
|-----------|---|--------|-----|--------|---|--------|-----|--------|-----|--------|-----|--------|---|--------|---|--------|---|--------|-----|
| Session 1 | Characteristic                                    | Me     | T   | Me     | T | Me     | T   | Me     | T   | Me     | T   | Me     | T | Me     | T | Me     | T | Me     | T   |
|           | Allowing each person to speak while others listen | 3.3    | 3.3 | 4      | 4 | 3.7    | 3.7 | 3.5    | 3.5 | 3.6    | 3.6 | 4      | 4 | 4      | 4 | 5      | 5 | 4.5    | 3.8 |
|           | Actively participating based on research          | 3.5    | 3.8 | 4      | 4 | 3.4    | 3.4 | 3.5    | 3.5 | 3.5    | 3.5 | 4      | 4 | 4      | 4 | 5      | 5 | 4      | 4   |
|           | Tasks and work are done prior to the meeting      | 3.5    | 3.5 | 4      | 3 | 2.9    | 3.1 | 1      | 1   | 2      | 1.8 | 4      | 4 | 4      | 4 | 5      | 5 | 4      | 4   |
|           | Members were on time                              | 3      | 2.3 | 3      | 2 | 3.6    | 3.6 | 3.5    | 3.5 | 3.5    | 3.5 | 4      | 4 | 4      | 1 | 5      | 5 | 3.8    | 3.5 |
|           | Compromising to come to consensus.                | 3.5    | 3.5 | 4      | 4 | 4      | 3.9 | 3.5    | 3.5 | 3.7    | 3.6 | 4      | 4 | 4      | 4 | 5      | 5 | 4.5    | 4   |
|           | There was a focus on student learning.            | 3.8    | 3.8 | 4      | 4 | 3.9    | 3.9 | 3.5    | 3.5 | 3.7    | 3.6 | 4      | 4 | 4      | 4 | 5      | 5 | 4      | 4   |

It is important to note that Team Four commented on its checklist that it was not prepared for the meeting because the meeting was scheduled at the last minute. This could explain the average of a 1 in the “Tasks and Work are Done Prior to the Meeting” category. Team eight was the team which completed their checklist together despite the directions. You will also note that this is the team which used a scale outside of the checklist rating. The researcher’s journal explains this score. At the curriculum coordinator’s meeting, a coordinator told the group that she had her team complete its checklist as a group. She also explained that her group

accomplished so much more than they usually accomplish at a typical meeting. In fact, her team wrote a full common assessment within the thirty minute time period.

One can tell from the chart that the teams are already performing as collaborative teams. All teams either “agree” or “strongly agree” that they allow each person to speak while others listen, that they actively participate based on research, that they compromise to come to consensus, and that there is a focus on student learning. There were some ratings which indicate “disagree” and “strongly disagree” under the category of “Tasks Were Done Prior to the Meeting” and “Members Were on Time.” Six out of nine of the teams responded that they agree or strongly agree that the teams completed the tasks prior to the meeting.

The collaborative checklists were also used at the Curriculum Coordinator’s meeting on March 12<sup>th</sup>. It is important to note that three members did not attend because they were out of the building. The scores from the checklists can be found in Table H. It appears that the Curriculum Coordinators’ felt that the teams allowed each person to speak while others listened, compromising was used to come to consensus, and that there was a focus on student learning.

Table H: Curriculum Coordinators’ Collaborative Checklist scores for March 12

| CC team   | Team's Avg. | My thoughts |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| Allowing each person to speak while others listen | 4           | 4           |
| Actively participating based on research          | 3.86        | 4           |
| Tasks and work are done prior to the meeting      | 3.29        | 3           |
| Members were on time                              | 2.29        | 2           |
| Compromising to come to consensus.                | 3.86        | 4           |
| There was a focus on student learning.            | 3.71        | 3           |

I compared the teams' responses to my own collaborative checklist in Table I. I strongly agreed that teams listened to each other, actively participated based on research, and compromised. However, I disagreed that the members were on time, which was a similar response from the team. I agreed that the team focused on student learning, but did not give that category a high rating because some of the discussions were about philosophical educational beliefs rather than student learning. For example, we discussed grading and the use of grading in the public school system. In general, there was little difference between my own checklist and the teams' average.

Table I: Curriculum Coordinator's Collaborative Checklist compared to Researchers Checklist

|   | Team's<br>Avg. | My<br>thoughts |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| CC team   |                |                |
| Allowing each person to speak while others listen | 4              | 4              |
| Actively participating based on research          | 3.86           | 4              |
| Tasks and work are done prior to the meeting      | 3.29           | 3              |
| Members were on time                              | 2.29           | 2              |
| Compromising to come to consensus.                | 3.86           | 4              |
| There was a focus on student learning.            | 3.71           | 3              |

At the March 12<sup>th</sup> Curriculum Coordinators' meeting, I mentioned the data and how pleased I was with the responses. I was particularly excited about the focus on student learning. Three team members instantly spoke up, which was paraphrased in the researcher's journal. One team member told the team the data would have been very different two years ago, and that this is a positive response from a two year commitment to professional learning communities. Another coordinator agreed with the first, but added that the teams have grown together and become comfortable with the professional learning community practices. A third coordinator proposed that this study would show drastic improvements in collaboration if we compared the results to thoughts and opinions from two years ago.

At the March 12<sup>th</sup> meeting, teams signed up for release time to continue their work on common assessments. I gave teams about two and a half hours of time to meet over a period of three days. After each meeting they were asked to complete the collaborative checklists. I found the collaborative checklists scores were generally favorable. All teams reported they focused on student learning and were continually meeting the collaborative expectations.

Team 1 began with relatively high scores but still was able to slightly improve in all areas. The final checklist had all 4's (strongly agree) marked next to every aspect of collaboration. The team made the most growth by attending the meetings on time. The first checklists showed that some team members were not on time the first few meetings but as they continued to meet the members became more punctual.

Team 2 only completed the first checklist despite my friendly e-mail reminders. The researcher's journal explained why this could have occurred. During the second week of the study, a Curriculum Coordinator came to me asking what her team number was. I explained I didn't have that information because the team checklists were kept confidential, even from me.

She decided to talk to other coordinators to help her determine her team number. It is possible she was unable to find her number so she didn't turn in any checklists.

Team 3 continued to have increased collaboration in all areas. They made the most improvements in two aspects of collaboration; tasks were done ahead of time and members were on time. These are similar results to Team 1. Team 3 gave themselves a score of 4 (strongly agree) that they, as individuals and as a team, focus on student learning.

Team 4 also improved in all aspects of collaboration but made the most improvement in tasks done ahead of time. Their first checklists indicated that the team strongly disagreed tasks were done ahead of time. By the end of the study, the team reported a 2.5 (an average between disagree and agree). A 2.5 is the lowest score in all of the final checklists but it is still better than where they started.

Team 5 increased across all areas but made a dramatic increase in that tasks were done ahead of time. Their original scores indicated the teams strongly disagreed tasks were done ahead of time compared to their final checklist showing that all members strongly agreed tasks were done ahead of time. Team 5 members reported they strongly agree the team's focus is on student learning by scoring an average of a 4 on the final checklist.

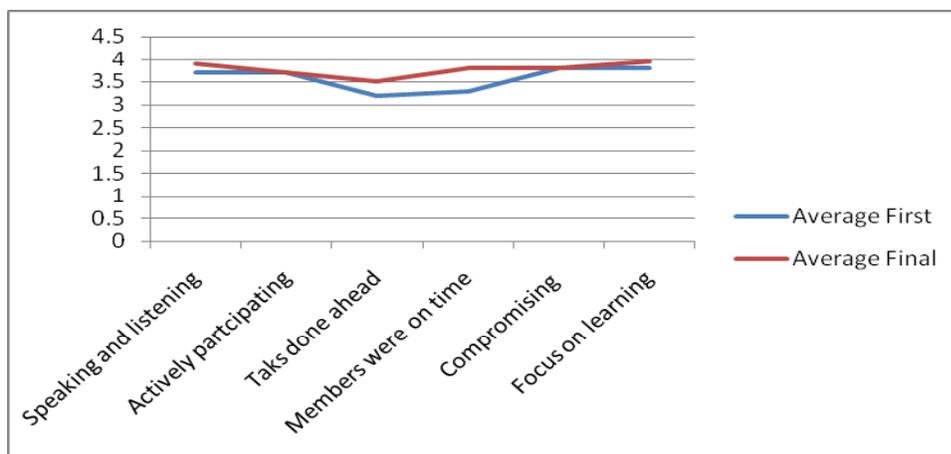
Team 6 and 7 consistently scored well on the checklists. Team 6 rated themselves at a 4, strongly agree, in all aspects of the collaboration checklist at every meeting. Both teams turned in four sets of checklists, which is more than other teams. Could increased time to meet improve collaboration? One team member on team 6 commented on the checklists, "We have a great team!" (March, 2009). Team 7 had all 4's in all areas except one member was late to their first meeting.

Team 8 began the study by handing in one checklist, completed by the coordinator, which represented the team's overall perceptions of collaboration. Interestingly, this team gave themselves a score of a 5 in all areas but the highest rating the checklist would allow was a 4. The checklist said, "We are golden!" on the top. Their final checklist indicated the team did not do as well as they had in the beginning. Although their scores went down in all areas, it was assumed the team followed the directions of the checklist rather than giving themselves a 5. The team did indicate that every time they met they strongly agreed the focus was student learning.

Team 9 slightly decreased in some areas of collaboration. Their original scores were very high, indicating the team worked well in all areas of collaboration. The final checklists showed a slight decrease in most areas but it was very minimal. However, the team reported they either agree or strongly agree that their team performed well in all areas of collaboration.

Table J shows every team's scores averaged together the first time they answered the checklist compared to their final checklist scores. You can see an overall increase in that members practiced active listening and took turn speaking, tasks were done ahead of time, members were on time, and a focus on student learning. Certainly, the increases are slight but the teams' data started very high.

Table J: Collaborative Checklist Final Results.



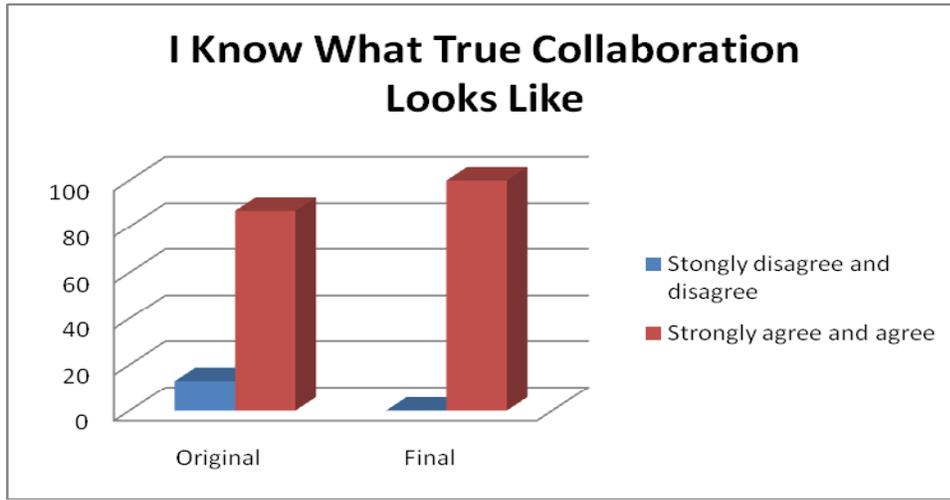
On the last day of the study the staff was asked to take a professional learning community survey, which was the same survey they took in the beginning of the study. Originally, twenty-three staff took the survey but only nineteen took the second survey. I tried to entice more participants by sending out friendly reminders at the last staff meeting. For reasons unknown to me, only nineteen people responded. Despite the low turnout, the results were favorable.

The first question asked the responders if they were confident they knew and understood the elements of professional learning communities. Originally 86% responded favorably, agree or strongly agree, to this question. The final survey indicated 95% of the responders felt they knew and understand the basic elements of a professional learning community. In fact, only one person indicated they do not know the elements of a professional learning community during the second survey.

One can assume the extra time the staff was given to collaborate resulted in an increase in question two. Ten percent of the staff felt they have more time to collaborate than the first survey indicated. Over 67% of the staff answered favorably, agree or strongly agree, that they have time to collaborate with their teams compared to a 57% favorable response in the first survey.

One of the most dramatic increases, 13%, was revealed in question three. Staff was asked if they know what true collaboration looks like. Originally 87% of the staff answered they knew what true collaboration looks like compared to the 100% who answered favorably on the second survey. Table K shows the difference between the staff responses from one survey to the next.

Table K: True Collaboration



The next three questions showed a decrease in favorable responses. Ninety percent of the staff indicated their teams have developed essential outcomes in the final survey, yet 95% of the staff said they had developed essential outcomes in the original survey. Likewise, ninety-five percent of the staff said they used essential outcomes to build common assessments which dropped by five percent in the final survey. There was only a 1% change in the question asking the staff if they were confident they could build common assessments.

Over 20% of the responders answered more favorably in the second survey over the first to the question, “I have used formative common assessments to guide further instruction”. In the final survey, over 72% of the staff indicated they either agree or strongly agree that they have used common assessments to guide instruction. In fact, 39% of the staff said they strongly agree that they have performed this task. Similarly, the staff felt more confident their teams could build formative common assessments than they had in the first survey. 78% of the staff indicated their teams could create common assessments compared to the 69% from the original survey.

The last question asked the staff if they need more training or resources to support professional learning communities. In the final survey less people, 12%, felt they needed more training or resources to support professional learning communities. This could mean 12% of the staff have the training and the resources they need in order to support professional learning communities.

I intended to meet with the Curriculum Coordinators one last time before the end of the study so we could review the KWL chart. However, our meeting was rescheduled because there were pressing issues, which took precedence over our meeting. Although the results do not appear in this study, the team did meet to complete the KWL chart.

### *Conclusions*

Professional learning communities has a multitude of elements which should be strategically initiated systematically within a school. Starting with too much too soon can exhaust the staff and the students. I wanted to be sure this study made small changes to enhance the current practices within the building which would make the biggest difference for our students. I choose to focus on collaboration around building common assessments. The teams had already been formed to create essential outcomes so this was a natural next step. I ensured each team was given clear expectations for collaboration and time to focus on student learning.

What were the results? The very areas of the study I choose to increase had the most favorable results. Teams felt they knew the basic elements of a professional learning community, they had more time to collaborate, they knew what good collaboration looks like, and they knew who to talk to about professional learning communities. This data was supported by the collaborative checklists and the differences between the professional learning community pre and post survey data.

It is important to discuss that the teams began this study suggesting they knew what true collaboration looked like and were already meeting to discuss student learning. This study created a schedule for them to meet more often and resources to support their specific goals which they did not have before.

### *Limitations and Challenges*

Time is always a limitation. I would have preferred to conduct this study over a year long period so I could track the progress of all the professional learning community elements. We were not able to complete the KWL chart with the curriculum coordinators as we had planned. The staff was asked to do a lot in a little amount of time. For example, one team met for over three hours one day and then met again for three hours two days later. They were able to create common assessments but they missed over five hours of instructional time while substitutes covered their classes.

Another limitation was that the staff has voiced their discontent for surveys and this study required each individual to complete two on-line surveys and three weekly checklists. Their discontent could have influenced their opinions and perceptions about the study. If the study lasted three or four months the surveys and checklists would not have appeared so daunting.

One of the biggest challenges was resolving all the issues with the collaborative checklists. One team forgot their team number and failed to turn in the checklists for two meetings. Another team did not follow the given scale for the collaborative checklists so it was difficult analyzing the data. The teams would have functioned more consistently if I knew their team numbers and was able to help them solve their problems.

### *Recommendations*

I recommend this project be done in any school that is working with professional learning communities. To make this project more successful, I recommend that a middle school leader starts the project in September and continues it throughout the year. I also challenge administrators to set high expectations for collaboration by collecting the checklists without promising anonymity. Finally, I would ensure that teachers are given enough high quality resources to support their work. Leaders need to provide teachers with a strategy guide, ample literature which is specific to their work, and time for teams to collaborate.

Appendix A: Reflective Journal

Research Journal

Today's date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Action Research Question: What strategies and middle school building leaders use to foster a professional learning community that focuses on student learning?

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Collaboration strategies                           |  |
| Observable and measurable outcomes from strategies |  |
| Reflections and recommendations                    |  |
| Collaborative Checklist Score                      | My Score _____ Curriculum Coordinators _____<br>Notes: |

Appendix B:Principal Consent Form

Jessica Potter

1761 River Road

Weare, NH 03281

(603) 680-1088

[blueriverfarm@gmail.com](mailto:blueriverfarm@gmail.com)

Date:

Dear NAME,

I am currently working on my Masters of Education degree through New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. Through this program, we are asked to complete an action research project. I have been reviewing research on professional learning communities; specifically how building leaders in the middle school can successfully use professional learning communities to focus on student learning. According to the research, staff who work under a clear student centered mission, values, and goals and are given time to collaborate will be more effective.

As a part of this action research project, the staff will participate in monthly collaborative meetings which have a clear purpose; building common formative assessments. These collaborative opportunities align with the mission and vision of the school. A focus group made up of representatives from each grade and curriculum area will provide me with valuable information and guidance about the collaborative process. I want to be sure the strategies which are recommended by professional learning communities works for our staff. Although this aligns nicely with present initiatives, staff will not be required to participate. Teacher consent

forms will be given to all staff. The jobs of staff who choose not to participate will not be affected and they will be reassured that participation is voluntary. Staff may withdraw their consent at any time and for any reason without penalty. There is no financial numeration for participating in the study.

Any information I gather about the staff or students will be kept strictly confidential. It will only be viewed by myself and my New England College professors. The data that I collect will be combined into a formal project where staff privacy will be protected. No names or other indentifying information will be used in the final project. The data will be kept in a locked file and will be destroyed five years after the project has been completed. The final project may be at some time published in a professional journal, presented to other professionals, or used in another text.

Please feel assured that the safety and confidentiality of staff members are my main concerns. I will take every precaution necessary to protect the students and the staff and make them feel comfortable during this process. I will be providing you with a summary of the results. Any staff member or community member may request a summary of the results or schedule an appointment to meet about the results.

I provided two copies of the consent forms. Please sign all copies and then return one to me. Please keep one for yourself. Thank you for your support of this project and the pursuit of my Master of Administration degree.

Sincerely,

Jessica Potter

**Informed Consent Form**

I (please circle one) Do or DO NOT wish to participate in the research project being conducted by Jess Potter. By signing below I understand and have read the guidelines in the attached letter. I understand that the choice to allow any data I have given to be included in the project is voluntary and that I may also withdraw my permission at any time.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C: Teacher Consent Form

Jessica Potter  
1761 River Road  
Weare, NH 03281  
(603) 680-1088

[blueriverfarm@gmail.com](mailto:blueriverfarm@gmail.com)

Date:

Dear (Teacher),

I am currently working on my Masters of Education degree through New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. Through this program we are asked to complete an action research project. I have been reviewing research on professional learning communities; specifically how building leaders in the middle school can successfully use professional learning communities to focus on student learning.

As a part of this action research project, the staff will participate in monthly collaborative meetings which have a clear purpose; building common formative assessments. These collaborative opportunities align with the mission and vision of the school. A focus group made up of representatives from each grade and curriculum area will provide me with valuable information and guidance about the collaborative process. Although this aligns nicely with present initiatives, staff will not be required to participate in this focus group.

Any information I gather about the staff or students will be kept strictly confidential. It will only be viewed by myself and my New England College professors. The data that I collect will be combined into a formal project where staff privacy will be protected. No names or other identifying information will be used in the final project. The data will be kept in a locked file and will be destroyed five years after the project. The final project may be at some time published in a professional journal, presented to other professionals, or used in another text.

Please feel assured that the safety and confidentiality are my main concerns. I will take every precaution necessary to protect the students and the staff and make them feel comfortable during this process. You may withdraw your consent at any time. If you do so, your data will not be included in the results however you may continue to participate in the project. I will be providing you with a summary of the results at the conclusion of the project. Any staff member or community member may request a summary of the results or schedule an appointment to meet about the results.

I provided two copies of the consent forms. Please sign one and then return it to me. Please keep one for yourself. Thank you for your support of this project and the pursuit of my Master of Administration degree.

Sincerely,

Jessica Potter

**Informed Consent Form**

I (please circle one) Do or DO NOT wish to participate in the research project being conducted by Jess Potter. By signing below I understand and have read the guidelines in the attached letter. I understand that the choice to allow any data I have given to be included in the project is voluntary and that I may also withdraw my permission at any time.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Collaborative Checklist

## Scoring Guide

4:strongly agree 3:agree 2: disagree 1:strongly disagree

| <b>Collaboration Checklist</b>               |  |   |                        |
|--|--|---|------------------------|
| To be completed after every meeting          |  |   |                        |
| <b><u>Goal or Norm for Collaboration</u></b> | <b><u>Myself</u></b><br>How effective was I meeting this goal? | <b><u>My Team</u></b><br>How effective was my team meeting this goal? | <b><u>Comments</u></b> |
| There was a clear focus and common purpose.  |  |   |                        |
| The team was productive.                     |  |   |                        |
| The team remained positive.                  |  |   |                        |
| The goal of the group was met.               |  |   |                        |
| Team norms were followed.                    |  |   |                        |

## Appendix E: Pre-Project Staff and Faculty Survey

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions.

**Scoring Guide**

4= strongly agree 3= agree 2=disagree 1= strongly disagree

|  | <b>Question</b>  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
|  | <b>I am confident I know and understand the professional learning community basic elements.</b>        |  |  |  |
|  | <b>I have time to collaborate with my team.</b>  |  |  |  |
|  | <b>I know what true collaboration looks like.</b>  |  |  |  |
|  | <b>My curriculum team has developed high-quality essential outcomes.</b>                               |  |  |  |
|  | <b>I can use essential outcomes to build common assessments.</b>                                       |  |  |  |
|  | <b>I am confident I can build formative common assessments.</b>  |  |  |  |
|  | <b>I have used formative common assessments to guide further instruction.</b>                          |  |  |  |
|  | <b>I am confident my team can build formative common assessments.</b>                                  |  |  |  |
|  | <b>I know who to talk to if I have questions about Professional Learning Communities.</b>              |  |  |  |
|  | <b>I have been to a professional learning community conference.</b>                                    |  |  |  |
|  | <b>I believe I need more training or resources so I can support Professional Learning Communities.</b> |  |  |  |

Is there any additional information you want the researcher to know?

## Appendix F: Collaboration Schedule

|                                      |                         |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>JANUARY</b>                       |                         |
| <b>WEDNESDAY 2:30-3:05</b>           | <b>1/14 AND 1/28</b>    |
| <b>CURRICULUM COORDINATORS</b>       | <b>8-JAN</b>            |
| <b>EARLY RELEASE OR RELEASE TIME</b> | <b>1/27 AND 1/12</b>    |
| <b>FEBRUARY</b>                      |                         |
| <b>WEDNESDAY 2:30-3:05</b>           | <b>11-FEB</b>           |
| <b>CURRICULUM COORDINATORS</b>       | <b>12-FEB</b>           |
| <b>EARLY RELEASE OR RELEASE TIME</b> | <b>20-FEB</b>           |
| <b>MARCH</b>                         |                         |
| <b>WEDNESDAY 2:30-3:05</b>           | <b>3/4 AND 3/18</b>     |
| <b>CURRICULUM COORDINATORS</b>       | <b>12-MAR</b>           |
| <b>EARLY RELEASE OR RELEASE TIME</b> | <b>3/13, 3/17, 3/20</b> |
| <b>APRIL</b>                         |                         |
| <b>WEDNESDAY 2:30-3:05</b>           | <b>4/8, 4/29</b>        |
| <b>CURRICULUM COORDINATORS</b>       | <b>28-APR</b>           |
| <b>EARLY RELEASE OR RELEASE TIME</b> | <b>4/ 3 AND 4/14</b>    |

## Appendix G: Strategy Guide

### **Building Common Assessments Strategy Guide**

Goal: Create a formative common assessment to be used in each marking period, which assesses student's knowledge of an essential outcome.

The plan: Educators will collaborate to create a common assessment based on Professional Learning Community practices.

- Research and presentations will be given to support the development of quality assessments.
- Templates and tools will be shared but the teams are encouraged to use any tool or template they choose to accomplish the goal.
- Suggested steps are included in this packet based on professional learning community practices. However, teams have full authority to change the steps as long as they accomplish the goal in a timely manner.
- Collaboration time will be scheduled with input from the teams. Early Release days and workshop days will be primarily used for PLC time. We fully understand that some teams may need more time and support than others

The Academic Coordinators Role: Is to ensure the team reaches the goal by providing best practices and research to support the development of teams working towards the goal. AC's will facilitate PLC meetings and be the "voice" of the team. AC's will want to establish Norms, create meeting agendas, and ensure the team is moving forward. If additional support is needed the AC's will ensure the team receives the support they need. The AC should encourage the team to strive for the best Common Assessment possible (see quality common assessments)

#### Suggested Steps:

1. Bring essentials to know, texts, and lesson planning guides to the meeting. As a team decide on one or two essentials to know which will be covered in the next quarter.
  - a. TIP: Choose an essential to know which will be covered in depth. This shouldn't be an ETK, which is touched upon. To agree on one ETK some members of the team may need to change some of their lessons to accommodate meeting this goal.
  - b. TIP: When you are beginning this process it might be easier to choose an ETK, which the teams feel, is easy to evaluate.

2. Keep the focus on what would students know and be able to do as a result of meeting this ETK. As a team, discuss the following questions: What would it look like if students were able to show their knowledge of this ETK? What type or types of assessment would be appropriate to show the students have learned the ETL?
  - a. TIP: Make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak and the voice of the group is heard. The AC should summarize the group's discussions and ask clarifying questions. This discussion should take anywhere between 20 minutes and one hour. It is easy for the talk to continue for hours but the AC should keep the meeting moving forward by summarizing and paraphrasing when necessary.
  - b. TIP: Write the outcomes of the discussion and ask for agreement among the team. This will guide the group as they continue their discussions.
  
3. Review best practices and research on Developing Common Assessments. Some information has been provided in this packet but there is so much more information out there!
  - a. TIP: Considering Cognitive Complexity and depth of knowledge when creating assessments.
  - b. TIP: Encourage each member of the team to share research. As a team, they should come to an agreement on criteria they will use to develop their common assessment. For example, "As a team we agree to compose an assessment which requires reasoning and synthesis of ideas."
  - c. TIP: This step could easily take teams off track- REMEMBER the ETK, remember the ETK, do not forget the ETK. Some teams may decide this step is too difficult because it is easy to obsess about the assessment types. The AC can move the team to the next step and still be successful.
  - d. TIP: The first Common Assessment doesn't need to be perfect, the second common assessment won't be perfect, and the last common assessment will need to be tweaked. Don't worry. A good common assessment is one that is changed after collaboration!
  
4. Brainstorming Activity: Team members should brainstorm a list of assessment questions on sticky notes, which could be used in their common assessment. There are no wrong answers!!!! After the brainstorming is done ask the teams to share their suggestions. Team members should choose questions. Some teams, like the ELA team, may decide to use a writing assignment instead of questions so the team should develop a rubric, as well.
  - a. TIP: It's ok if the same kind of question is asked in different ways. The AC should suggest both questions should appear on the assessment but share the 'weight' of another question. Later, when the team reviews the students assessments they can determine if both questions were necessary (this is easier to determine when you look at the students answers)
  - b. TIP: Review the questions and ask, "If students answered all of these questions correctly would you feel confident they know and are able to do the ETK?" The team may decide to change, modify, and add assessment questions based on the discussion.

- c. TIP: The AC may suggest the team take the questions and review them outside of collaboration time.
  
5. Write the common assessment and choose how to evaluate the assessment. Some teams may choose to score the assessment and use a weight system, “Question 1 is worth twenty points because it requires more cognitive complexity”. Some teams may decide to score the assessment with a rubric or other tool. Teams should also agree what the “Target Score” is. Of course we expect students to succeed 100% of the time but remember not all students will be able to meet the expectations the first time because they need interventions and it to be taught in another way. Therefore, the team should decide on a goal or target for their class. For example, “The target score is 80%”
  - a. TIP: Some teams may not agree to how the assessment should be weighted. It’s ok as long as the voice of the team is heard. The AC will help make a decision to move the group forward. Remember we are not looking for perfection. The team will have a better understanding of the weight of assessments when they review the student’s responses. **IT IS THE PROFESSIONAL DISCUSSIONS WHICH ARE VALUABLE.**
  
6. Decide on the date the assessment should be given. It is important the assessment is given on the same day. Yes, this may mean teams adapt and change when they teach.
  - a. TIP: Teams who help each other create schedules, which allow the assessment to be given on the same day, will be far more productive. Work with each other and be accommodating.
  - b. TIP: The date should allow time for the team to give the assessment, collaborate and review the assessment, re-teach and provide in-class interventions, and then re-evaluate.
  
7. Administer the assessment on the agreed upon time and correct.
  - a. TIP: Teams may decide to correct individually or as a team. In fact, some teams may decide to correct their own class then switch and correct another class. This will give you different perspectives especially if a rubric is used.
  
8. The team should meet to discuss the assessment results using the following questions to guide discussions:
  - a. Who are the students that performed above the target score?
  - b. Who are the students who performed under the target score?
  - c. Who are the students who performed below the targeted score and need major re-teaching?
  - d. Based on student performance, what are some patterns, categories, or trends that are emerging?
  - e. What differentiated instruction might be implanted to challenge students who are working at or above the target score?
  - f. What differentiated instruction might be implemented to support and challenge these students?
  - g. What are the instructional goals for re-teaching?

- h. What teaching strategies proved to be successful for students?
  - i. Did the common assessment truly evaluate whether students knew the ETK?
  - j. Would you consider making any changes to the assessment?
  - k. As a result of these observations, what might be the next step?
    - i. TIP: Teachers should answer these questions in isolation then share with the team.
    - ii. TIP: Before teams share it might be wise to review norms and ground rules.
    - iii. TIP: Use the “Teacher Data Collection and Instructional Planning Worksheet” to help teachers answer questions a-h.
9. The team should decide on the “next step”.
- a. TIP: Teams should decide based on the student assessment scores. The intervention or re-teaching can be done in flexible groups or within the original classes.
  - b. TIP: Teams can “beg, borrow, and steal” strategies that worked for other classes.
10. Do intervention or re-teaching. Then re-assess and answer the same questions as in step 8.
- a. Was the intervention/ re-teaching successful?
    - i. How do you know?
  - b. What else should be done so all students meet the target?

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