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PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING
COMMUNITIES

ONE STEP AT A TIME

Many professional learning teams
pass through these 7 stages

BY PARRY GRAHAM
AND BILL FERRITER

Imagine having the opportunity to work at a new middle school, built around professional learning community principles. From day one, teachers are organized into professional learning teams working to define essential curriculum, develop common assessments, and analyze student data. Similarly, administrators work as a team to support the development of professional learning teams and emphasize a distributed model of leadership. Several years ago, we had the opportunity to work as a teacher and an administrator in this new school in the Wake County (N.C.)



Public School System.

With little experience to guide us, we learned a number of important lessons. First, professional learning teams represent a powerful mechanism for improvements in teaching and learning. Second, developing successful professional learning teams is difficult, requiring concerted effort from teachers and administrators. And third, while different teams develop at different rates and with different personalities, most professional learning teams pass through similar stages in terms of the nature of their work.

Like many, we found that the work of professional learning teams progressed from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. Helping teams make that progression, however — and emphasizing effective dialogue and reflection along the way — are key components in building a professional learning community. Here we outline these stages of development and provide recommendations for supporting and challenging teams.

**STAGE 1:
FILLING THE TIME**

The first question that novice teams often ask is: “What exactly are we supposed to do?” Initial meetings can be rambling affairs, especially for teams lacking clear guidelines. As teachers initially explore collaboration, meetings can swing from one extreme to the other: either struggling to fill time or tackling too many tasks in hour-long meetings. Frustration is inevitable for groups struggling with new responsibilities.

The best way to help teams move quickly out of this stage is to set clear work expectations. Defining specific tasks — such as identifying essential objectives or creating a common assessment — lends direction to an ambiguous and overwhelming process. Sample agendas, suggested team roles, and sets of adaptable

norms are helpful for developing teams. When school leaders fail to provide basic structures for early meetings, collaboration can quickly become confusing and seen as a waste of time by teachers comfortable with isolation.

**STAGE 2:
SHARING PERSONAL PRACTICES**

A common next question is: “What is everyone doing in their classrooms?” Teachers may be genuinely interested in what other teachers are doing, hoping to pick up new ideas. Or it may be that talking about teaching feels like collaboration. Initially, there is great value in these conversations because sharing practices makes instruction transparent. More importantly, conversations about practices are comfortable, serving as a first step toward establishing positive patterns of interpersonal dialogue among team members.

Unfortunately, many groups fail to move beyond sharing instructional practices to the real work of learning teams: Reflection resulting in teacher learning and improved instruction. School leaders can promote meaningful work by requiring team members to arrive at collaborative decisions around curriculum, assessment, or instruction. Teams can create shared minilessons that all teachers will deliver, shifting the focus from individual efforts to a collective exploration of effective instruction.

PARRY GRAHAM is an assistant principal at Cedar Fork Elementary School in the Wake County Public School System in Raleigh, N.C. You can contact him at parrygraham@hotmail.com.

BILL FERRITER teaches 6th-grade science and social studies at Salem Middle School in Apex, N.C. Ferriter writes a regular column for the NSDC newsletter *Teachers Teaching Teachers* and keeps a blog about the teaching life, *The Tempered Radical*, at the Teacher Leaders Network web site, www.teacherleaders.org. You can contact him at wferriter@hotmail.com.

**STAGE 3:
PLANNING, PLANNING,
PLANNING**

As teachers learn to work together, teams will wonder: “What should we be teaching, and how can we lighten the load?” Planning — a task that consumes all teachers — becomes an ideal place for collective efforts.

At this stage, school leaders may see a self-imposed standardization of the curriculum emerge. All teachers within a team begin teaching roughly the same content at roughly the same time in roughly the same way. Less experienced or effective teachers benefit from the planning acumen of more successful colleagues. Teams are also able to delegate responsibilities. Rather than each teacher individually planning every lesson, different members take responsibility for sets of lessons and share their work.

Unfortunately, teams often grow comfortable with shared planning and fail to focus on results. Unless challenged, team attention remains centered on teaching rather than learning. The most effective way for school leaders to move teams forward is to structure efforts to use student achievement data in the planning process. School leaders must ask teams to answer basic questions about outcomes: “Are your students learning what you want them to learn? How do you know?”

**STAGE 4:
DEVELOPING COMMON
ASSESSMENTS**

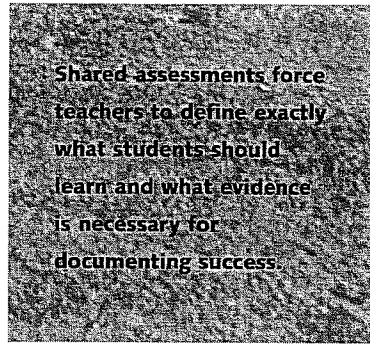
New thinking related to student outcomes forces teams to ask: “What does mastery look like?” This question can cause controversy by tapping into teachers’ deepest philosophies. Should the classroom focus be on basic skills or on applying knowledge in real-

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world situations? Which is more important: being able to get the right answer or being able to explain your work?

Teams first struggle with these questions while developing common assessments. Shared assessments force teachers to define exactly what students should learn and what evidence is necessary for documenting success. Novice teams may work to avoid common assessments, thereby steering clear of difficult conversations, but common assessments are essential if teams are to shift their focus from teaching to learning.

Productively wrestling with fundamental beliefs requires teachers to develop the interpersonal skills necessary for working through contention. Having set individual direction with little intervention for years, many



experienced teachers lack the skills for finding common ground. While teams with positive relationships thrive on the synergy generated by complex conversations, teams struggling with personalities need real support. School leaders should consider moderating difficult conversations and modeling strategies for joint decision making.

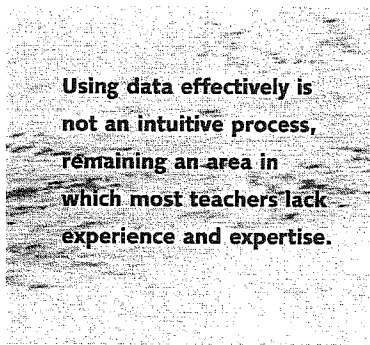
Teams may also need additional skill development in assessment during this stage. While teachers often possess an intuitive understanding of their students, common assessments require a measure of standardization, both of task and of judgment, to provide reliable comparisons. Investing energies in simplistic measures of performance will only frustrate teams and stall future work. Time spent on a study of the core differences between assessments *of* learning and *for* learning as well as a review of strategies for assessing a wide range of outcomes ensures that joint evaluation of student learning will be embraced by developing teams.

**STAGE 5:
ANALYZING STUDENT LEARNING**

After administering common

assessments, the next question is perhaps the most challenging: “Are students learning what they are supposed to be learning?” It is at this stage that professional learning teams begin to shift their focus from teaching to learning. This is also the stage where teacher teams need the most technical and emotional support.

Technically, teachers often require significant training on data analysis and interpretation. Using data effectively is not an intuitive process, remaining an area in which most teachers lack experience and expertise. School leaders who provide structures and tools for effective data analysis are rewarded with highly motivated teams driven by results. Many successful learning communities repurpose positions, hiring teachers trained in data analysis to assist teams in identifying



trends in student learning.

Common assessment data will reveal varying levels of student success across classrooms, leading to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and defensiveness. Teachers are put in the delicate position of publicly facing what they will inevitably — yet inaccurately — view as individual successes and failures. This intensely personal reaction

is understandable from invested professionals confronted with hard evidence.

When handled properly, analysis of student learning can lead to rich conversations about effective instruction. As teachers spot patterns in data, they can work as a unit to respond productively. On highly functioning teams, collective intelligence provides a never-ending source of solutions for addressing shared challenges. Getting teams to this point, however, requires emotional support and patience.

School leaders are encouraged to create safe environments in which teachers can discuss common assessments and to model nonjudgmental approaches to data. Separating the person from the practice is an essential first step for teams examining results. School leaders should also

“walk the walk,” sharing reports reflecting their own work, such as faculty or parent surveys, in public forums.

By modeling a data-oriented approach, school leaders send the message that data analysis is about improving outcomes, not judging individuals.

**STAGE 6:
DIFFERENTIATING FOLLOW-UP**

While teacher teams almost naturally move to the next stage of development — responding instructionally to student data — school leaders can facilitate this transition in two important ways: by asking teams to reflect on the right questions and by giving teams the resources needed to craft appropriate responses.

As teams become adept at analyzing student data, school leaders should no longer be directing team development, instead serving as collaborative partners in ongoing conversations about teaching and learning. Teams at this point in the process are typically performing at a high level, taking collective responsibility for student success rather than responding as individuals.

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The most effective way to further develop a team at this level is to pose questions, both to the team and to individual members: “Which instructional practices are the most effective across your team? What concepts do your students struggle with? Are your students able to apply knowledge to novel problems?” By posing provocative questions and demonstrating flexibility as teams pursue various approaches for intervention and enrichment, school leaders encourage

the professional ownership that defines accomplished educators.

More importantly, however, school leaders must identify concrete ways to support differentiation. Traditionally, this has meant identifying professional development opportunities or providing substitutes so that teachers can plan responses as a group. Interested teams are often engaged in partnerships with sister schools sharing similar student populations. Funding is provided for after-school tutoring, honoring the talents of teachers filling once voluntary roles.

But supporting differentiation also requires a commitment to nontraditional school structures and processes beyond the classroom. Effective administrators reallocate positions, focusing resources on struggling students. Rethinking the role of guidance counselors, secretaries, teacher assistants, media specialists, assistant principals, and literacy coaches creates a pool of human capital that can be tapped to address the challenges involved in differentiating learning for all students.

Action from those beyond the classroom is essential to maintaining a learning community’s momentum. While school leaders can begin to move out of a directive role with individual teams, their efforts to coordinate available resources, support innovative approaches to differentiation, and engage faculty members in new work will determine how successful a building will be at meeting the needs of every learner.

**STAGE 7:
REFLECTING ON INSTRUCTION**

Teams performing at a high level will eventually ask one final question: “Which practices are most effective with our students?” This question brings the process of professional learning team development full circle, connecting learning back to teaching.

Teams at this point are engaged in deep reflection, tackling innovative projects such as action research or lesson studies.

At this point, school leaders should facilitate a team’s ability to explore the teaching-learning connection. Efforts might include giving teachers the opportunity to observe each other or providing released time to complete independent projects. When multiple teams in the school are at this level, school leaders may facilitate cross-team conversations, creating opportunities for practices and perspectives to migrate school-wide.

NAVIGATING A CHALLENGING PATH

While the process of developing a professional learning team may feel uniquely personal, we believe certain stages of development are common across teams. We hope that by helping educators to understand that these stages exist and by describing both the challenges and opportunities inherent in each stage, we can improve the chances of success.

The path to building learning communities may be difficult, but students will benefit from the process. While teachers face significant challenges, so do school leaders committed to supporting substantive teacher collaboration. Those leaders must play multiple roles — at times, walking with the members of a professional learning team; at times, walking a few steps ahead and anticipating the next turn in the road. ■