INTRODUCTION

For the past two years, Johnston County Public Schools has made professional learning communities (PLCs) a district focus. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website, a professional learning community is a group of teachers united in their commitment to student learning which engage in "a variety of activities including sharing a vision, working and learning collaboratively, visiting and observing other classrooms, and participating in shared decision making" (http:/ /www.dpi.state.nc.us/profdev/resources/proflearn/). Many in education believe that professional learning communities "can transform the nature of adult interaction and learning in schools by engaging teachers in the same continual process of learning and improvement that we ask our students to strive for in their work" (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2007).

Last school year, the faculty at my school received training on how to properly utilize professional learning communities. At the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, the county organized staff development that brought together all middle school social studies teachers from across the district. At this first meeting we were able to share lesson ideas and brainstorm with one another. It was professional learning communities on steroids! Once more this school year, we have gotten together to plan. This is where my leadership project idea emerged from. I thought, "wouldn't it be awesome if the Eighth-grade social studies teachers throughout the county were able to share lesson ideas and plan together without having to drive to a central location on a teacher workday?" To answer this question, I started my leadership project by researching and investigating professional learning communities in order to further

develop my leadership project focus.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

History and Characteristics of PLCs

The phrase "professional learning communities" was first coined in the 1960's but really began to develop meaning in the 1990's. The first mention of the phrase was used as a way to combat teacher isolation. During the 1990's, researchers in education began to really investigate the phrase by conducting studies, which would allow them to establish clear definitions and criteria for professional learning communities. One researcher, Milbrey McLaughlin, announced that PLCs were the answer to long-term school improvement. A 1993 research report stated that strong PLCs were characterized by professional growth, reflective practice, shared norms and beliefs, mutual support and mutual obligation, collegial relations, collaborative cultures, and ongoing technical inquiry regarding effective practice (www.allthingsplc.info). Later studies confirmed these characteristics and elaborated on their design. Janet Scull and Neville Johnson (1999) identified ten characteristics of effective PLCs from their study of twenty-three PLCs in Australia. These characteristics are: learning teams require a purpose to engage in collaboration, all teachers in the team are responsible for student learning, professional development should be work-based in nature even if brought from outside of the school, teams practice many forms of collaboration and reflect on their practice, the work of PLCs needs to be interesting and challenging but manageable to ensure a sense of satisfaction, teams require knowledgeable and supportive formal leadership, formal leaders should be able to handle the tension of being between administration

and larger initiators of projects, all members must see themselves as change agents, PLCs must embrace change, and have realistic but challenging expectations (pp. 36-42). The work that had the single most important influence on PLCs in education was Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker's book *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (www.allthingsplc.info). Knowing the history behind professional learning communities made me realize how recent the concept is to education, but also how quickly the idea has been accepted and developed.

Within my own school, the concept of professional learning communities has really grown and taken shape. I sat down with social studies teacher Bethany Meyers (personal communication, April 23, 2012) to find out about the progression of professional learning communities within the school I teach and participate weekly in the social studies professional learning team. She told me that when she first started teaching at McGee's in 2005, teachers did not work together at all. In fact, she remembered how one eighth-grade social studies teacher would focus on projects throughout the year and everyone did their own thing. When I came to the school she began to help me plan, since I was a new teacher, and we just continued to meet together year after year. During the 2009-2010 school year, a man came from Solution tree to have a talk with the entire staff about professional learning teams. She recalls how nothing much happened after this talk but then during the 2010-2011 school year, Debbie Woodruff came from the county to provide professional development on professional learning communities to all certified staff. In fact one of Dr. Croom's, Johnston County Superintendent, areas of focus for this school year is PLCs. In her personal opinion, she likes knowing that she is teaching the same things as her fellow

social studies teachers and she does not feel that professional learning teams are a waste of time. Mrs. Meyers also likes being able to share ideas with her fellow colleagues and as a parent of a child in the eighth-grade, she feels assured at knowing that her child is getting the same quality of education that she gives to her students each day.

What Makes a PLC Successful?

A lot goes into the making of a successful professional learning community. In the article, *Supporting Teacher Learning Teams,* the authors make several recommendations for success, but they also highlight several common pitfalls that PLCs often find themselves. Recommendations for success include: creating a school culture that supports "teachers as learners," establishing a clear meeting process, developing a protocol for gathering data to share at meetings, appointing facilitators that can create supportive environments, providing facilitators with adequate support, and having principals who are actively involved and supportive of professional learning communities. Steve Chappuis, Jan Chappuis, and Rick Stiggins (2007) also warn that PLCs should avoid common pitfalls by using teacher friendly materials, make sure they have sufficient amounts of time and resources available to meet their goals, consider the composition of teams, keep professional development focuses for multiple years, and clearly communicate the structure and responsibilities required.

Benefits for Teachers and Students

There are many benefits, for students and teachers, which are the direct result of the PLC process. John Arnold and Chris Stevenson (1998) believe that

"the advantages of teaming from the students' perspective are not limited

to the social and emotional realm, however. Effective teams also promote

young adolescents' intellectual development and enhance their opportunities

for academic success. By frequently discussing the needs and performance of

students whom they know well in team meetings, teachers learn from each other

as they share insights about students' strengths, weaknesses, interests, and

abilities" (p. 5).

Ultimately, being informed about students is key for educators. Teaming up in

professional learning communities also benefits teachers. Professional learning

communities help teachers enjoy their work more and grow in their profession. Most

importantly however, teachers are able to have the meaningful interactions they are

craving with their colleagues which help them to build strong relationships. By teaming

up and meeting, teachers are also able to build off of one another's distinctive strengths

(p. 6-7). I asked fellow social studies professional learning team member, Diana Gilliam

(personal communication, April 23, 2012) about her beliefs concerning the benefits of

professional learning teams. She thought back to when she was a first year teacher and

remembered how beneficial it was to have a good PLC to plan with. The members were

always supplying her with resources, copies, and lesson activities to get her started when

she had nothing. When I asked her if she had experienced any downfalls with PLCs she

said, "how can there be a downfall when it makes you a better teacher."

The benefits of teaming can be seen in other schools as well. Teachers across

the country have positive things to say about their PLC work. The science PLC at Fort

Smith Arkansas' Kimmons Junior High School revealed that their professional learning

community has made them feel that they are no longer isolated and alone in their

teaching, but have the support of colleagues (PLC-Professional Learning Communities

Implementation, 2010). Teachers in Wake County, North Carolina are finding time during early release days to meet for one hour each week either by subject area or grade level. With the students completely gone, teachers are able to focus on instructional strategies, students, and data. Principal Mike Chappell of Jones Dairy Elementary School revealed that the school's End-of-Grade test scores improved nine percentage points overall once they implemented professional learning communities (Professional Learning Teams, The School Connection, December 2008, 2009). Teachers at Visitation School, used PLCs to spread knowledge, provide guidance, and put in place a school wide curriculum for writing where all subjects were involved with working on writing goals (PLC (Professional Learning Communities), 2010). Clearly, professional learning communities are a positive educational concept with many benefits to student and teacher learning and achievement.

LEADERSHIP PROJECT PROPOSAL

So again I ask, wouldn't it be awesome if the Eighth-grade social studies teachers throughout the county were able to share lesson ideas and plan together without having to drive to a central location on a teacher workday? New technology has made my idea possible. Therefore, for my leadership project I am proposing to create a wikispace devoted to the county's Eighth-grade social studies teachers. The wikispace would be a professional learning community resource that would allow all Eighth-grade social studies teachers, in the district, to share and contribute lesson ideas, movies or videos, reading excerpts, activities, projects, worksheets and handouts, warmups, textbook related notes, useful websites, and field trip ideas, forms, and contacts. The wikispace

would also allow teachers to engage in ongoing data driven discussions about student learning. The wikispace would allow Eighth-grade social studies teachers to collaborate year long without relying on teacher workdays and traveling to a central location.

Since the school year is almost at its end, I propose creating the wikispace over the summer while also gaining the county's clearance and support for the project. At the first PLC teacher workday, I would introduce the idea to the Eighth-grade social studies teachers and show them how to navigate the wiki. I would also help them join the wiki so that they would be able to add content and contribute their ideas. My hope is that the wiki would continue to grow throughout the first year as teachers cover relevant topics using the Common Core Curriculum, pacing guide, and related ancillary materials. Using the pacing guide, I would monitor the wikispace and send out reminders at least one week before teachers would begin planning for the next topic. The wikispace could also be used to facilitate the creation of teacher-created common assessments. Eighth-grade social studies teachers would then be able to gather and analyze student learning using the wiki. Since a key piece with professional learning communities involves being able to have open discussion about topics of relevance, I would also want to include the ability to invite teachers to participate in online discussion using the wikispace but also other discussion tools such as Elluminate. With Elluminate, discussions can be recorded and linked to the wikispace, making them available for those unable to participate in the discussion.

There are tons of resources available that discuss professional learning communities, but I was surprised to see that the internet provides resources for using wikispaces with professional learning communities. At http://plcweb.wikispaces.com/,

visitors are shown how to use new technologies with their professional learning

communities to "access information, capture the conversation, and focus

communication." The available tutorials show users how to use Google Docs, create

webinars and blogs, communicate online using live video, and how to build a

professional learning network. Another website I believe will be useful in building my

leadership project is http://plctemplate.wikispaces.com/. The website offers a "how to

guide" for putting together a PLC wikispace by informing users of how to add content,

hyperlinks, navigation, and insert images and files. Most importantly, the website offers

users a common template for content they may want to consider making available on

their own PLC wikispace such as items related to PLC business, course information, and

instructional strategies. For Johnston County, it would be helpful if the wikispace I

design includes links to team norms, critical questions, SMART goals, and discussions

under PLC business. For course information, I would want to include the suggested

links to content standards, learning outcomes, formative assessments, summative

assessments, and syllabus. For instructional strategies, I would want to include the

suggested links to structured lessons and collaborative learning.

SCHOLARLY CONCLUSIONS

My leadership project has allowed me to learn more about professional learning

communities and their effective characteristics. Through my research, I was able to

learn how PLCs can become successful professional development environments with

the main focus on teacher learning, clear communication and guidelines, teacher

commitment to student learning and change, reflective practice, strong and supportive

leadership, and data driven results. I was also able to learn about how other schools are utilizing wikispaces as a form of collaboration for professional learning communities. The district wide, social studies professional learning community that I am proposing to create would not replace the small school-based teams, but would enhance their work by allowing for more large scale collaboration. Perhaps the successes of one Eighth-grade social studies PLC can become the successes of all county Eighth-grade social studies PLCs and that is my hope for the proposed leadership project.

Annotated Bibliography

Arnold, J., & Stevenson, C. (1998). *Teachers' teaming handbook: A middle level*

planning guide. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Each chapter of the book provides team scenarios that show readers how to carry

out a certain aspect of professional learning teams. For example, the authors show

readers how to develop a team vision, work with curriculum related goals,

communicate, and set up team procedures.

Chappuis, S., Chappuis, J., & Stiggins, R. (2009). Supporting Teacher Learning Teams.

Educational Leadership, 66(5). 56-60.

The article makes six recommendations for how professional learning

communities can be successful and mainly focuses on how teachers can become

learners. However, the article also describes some of the pitfalls that professional

learning communities often face. If used correctly, the authors suggest that PLCs can

transform the nature of adult interaction and learning in schools.

ChristopherHa93. (Producer). (8, August 2010). *PLC-Professional Learning*

Community Implementation. Retrieved from

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWUoceQsZ3A&feature=related

The video shows how Fort Smith Arkansas' Kimmons Junior High School

implemented PLCs in order to improve student learning. The video interviews the

teachers in the Science professional learning team and shows their positive reactions to

implementing PLCs.

Gregory, G., & Kuzmich, L. (2007). *Teacher teams that get results : 61 strategies for*

sustaining and renewing professional learning communities. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

The book details 61 strategies for sustaining and renewing professional learning communities. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of the professional learning community and then provides examples of activities teams can do to fully commit to each aspect. For instance, chapter two focuses on sharing knowledge and skills while chapter four looks at determining team priorities and creating excellence.

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Professional Learning Communities. Retrieved from http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/profdev/resources/proflearn/.

This page of the NCDPI website gives the state's definition of professional learning communities, why they are important in education, and how to create them. The page also includes links to suggested discussions that PLCs should engage in and suggested readings.

PLC Template. (2012). Retrieved April 14, 2012 from the PLC Template Wiki: http://plctemplate.wikispaces.com/.

The website offers a brief tutorial on how to use wikispaces as a professional learning community resource. It also provides a template for how professional learning communities can set up their own wikispace by including suggested navigation links.

Scull, J., & Johnson, N. J. (1999). The Power of Professional Learning Teams. *Improving Schools, 2*(1), 34-43).

The authors discuss ten characteristics of effective professional learning teams based on a study conducted of 23 professional learning teams in Australian schools. The ten characteristics are outlined and described in detail as to how they relate to

successfully facing the challenges of between-classroom differences, workplace overload

and intensification, and failed implementation.

Solution Tree. All Things PLC: All Information No Commerce. Retrieved from

http://www.allthingsplc.info.

The website is devoted to all things PLC by providing articles and research

about professional learning communities as well as tools and resources on any aspect

of professional learning communities one might be interested in such as how to create

SMART goals. The most inspirational part of the website is the ability to locate PLC

schools using a map and viewing real evidence that shows how these schools became

successful using PLCs.

Using Technology to Support Your PLC: An Overview. (2012). Retrieved April 14, 2012

from the PLC Web Wiki: http://plcweb.wikispaces.com/.

The website offers tutorials on how to use technology tools to increase

communication and collaboration within professional learning communities. Tutorials

are given on Google Docs, webinars, creating professional learning networks, and using

ipads in education.

Visitationtv. (Producer). (6, March 2010). *PLC (Professional Learning Communities)*.

Retrived from

http://www.youtube.com/watch?

v=xEoJ6DLrBtQ&context=C47c13bcADvjVQa1PpcFMSqDWxuZGM2Zch4PHdp

Oadxh8MatDpzb4=

The video documents how Visitation School's faculty asks four essential questions

when operating within their PLCs. They want to know what they want students to know,

how they will assess student knowledge, what they will do when students know, and

what they will do when students do not know. The school has taken initiative to increase

their writing curriculum school wide and the video documents the success they have

experienced.

Wake County Schools. (Producer). (7, December 2009). *Professional Learning Teams:*

The School Connection, December 2008. Retrieved from

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJDhPXQY318&feature=related

The video explains how Jones Dairy Elementary School in Wake County, NC

has utilized early release days in order to meet for one hour a week. Within their PLCs,

teachers have been able to focus on student learning and instructional practices which

has resulted in increased End-of-Grade test scores.