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Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD



The Power of Professional Learning Communities to Disrupt Inequity and Ensure Learning for All

“Schools should serve as the great equalizer of the conditions of men [and] the balance wheel of the social machinery.” —Horace Mann

Schools functioning as Professional Learning Communities—those that create schoolwide and systematic pyramids of intervention to support students both academically and behaviorally—are best equipped to eliminate the “barriers that create opportunity gaps for students on the basis of their socioeconomic level, race, ethnicity, and gender” (ASCD, 2016). PLCs effectively disrupt inequity (Mahiri, 2008) by ensuring all students have universal access to the kinds of rigorous systems of support they need to achieve at high levels.

Teachers working within a PLC represent our best hope to challenge the notion that demographics are destiny. They leave nothing to chance and truly believe it is their responsibility to ensure a high level of learning for all students. These schools are guided by leaders who create a sense of urgency, set a clear purpose, and ensure everyone understands the need to achieve the mission of learning for all. Teachers in such schools examine personal and societal beliefs about gaps in achievement, discipline, attendance, engagement, and ultimately income, happiness and freedom. Educators driven by this understanding are aware of opportunity gaps in their own building and work together, as a learning community, to address them.

Mike Mattos insists that schools must be better prepared to respond to inequity if we have any hope of closing the opportunity gap. He argues it is inevitable that, “some students will enter each school year lacking essential skills that should have been mastered in prior years—skills such as foundational reading, writing, number sense, and English language proficiency. These students will require intensive interventions in these areas to succeed” (Mattos, 2016). Our best schools help students overcome such obstacles and ensure that students receive extra time and support during the regular school day, without missing classroom instruction. The schools operating as true PLCs also raise the bar for marginalized students, encouraging them to take more rigorous courses—with accompanying help embedded in the school day.

“There is a harsh reality that we, as educators, must address if we ever hope to reach our mission of learning for all: most schools have been inaccurately and unfairly judging student academic potential, to the detriment of our most at-risk youth.”—Mike Mattos (2016)

Given how schools are empowered with plenty of data to predict the majority of learning difficulties, we are ideally

positioned to raise expectations and prevent (or at least mitigate) many of those struggles. Reflect on how schools functioning as PLCs address the impact that poverty (one of the most persistent and predictable drivers of inequity) has on certain aspects of academics and behavior.

Academics: Poverty impacts a student’s vocabulary which impacts their readiness to learn. Bracey reported that toddlers from middle and upper-income families actually use more words in talking to their parents than low-SES mothers used in talking to their children (Bracey, 2006). Jensen points to a study by Hart and Risley which found that, “by three years old, children of professional parents were adding words to their vocabularies at about twice the rate of children in welfare families.” (Jensen, 2013). In contrast to their colleagues in traditional schools, teachers in a PLCs seek to establish whether all students can understand and access the academic vocabulary necessary for success in the upcoming unit of instruction. They purposely design pre-assessments that check a student’s prior knowledge and prerequisites skills—including key vocabulary—and choose their instructional strategies very intentionally based on data from common assessments. These teachers recognize and consciously respond to the impact poverty has on learning.

Behavior: Poverty influences behavior in ways that are not always understood. Children raised in poverty are more likely than their affluent peers to experience both acute and chronic stress (Almeida, Nuepert, Banks, and Serido, 2005; Evans and Schamberg, 2009). Those in poverty are five times more likely to be evicted and live in conditions that generate symptoms indistinguishable from PTSD (Childhood Trauma Recovery, 2015). School behaviors (for students living in poverty) often include failure to respond to questions or requests, passivity, slumped posture, and disconnection from peers or academics. According to Jensen, “These behaviors are often interpreted as being signs of ‘attitude’ or laziness, but they are actually symptoms of stress” (Jensen, 2013). Teachers in PLCs reject the traditional disciplinary responses focused on punishment and accountability and instead, embrace behavioral interventions based on responsibility and engagement. In these schools, pyramids of intervention address both academic **and** behavior needs of students.

The purposeful attention to the PLC question—how will we respond when students do not learn—often requires a creative use of time and talent. For instance, the most successful schools schedule an access/enrichment/intervention period into **every** school day, sharing students and expertise, with a focus on both academic and behavior needs. This type of flexibility provides more opportunity for the best and brightest teachers to spend focused, substantial time with our most disadvantaged students.

Another approach to disrupting inequity is a modernized tutoring center (Koselak & Lyall, 2016). Adaptable to a variety of settings, a successful tutoring center is embedded in the school day, open to all but directive to some, and powered by collec-

tive capacity of teachers, community volunteers, and trained peer tutors. The support is directive, timely, and can target academic **and** behavior needs. By using existing resources intentionally, schools can ensure all students receive the extra time and support needed to meet rigorous standards. Schools centralizing resources in this manner are eliminating gaps, raising the bar and ensuring learning for all students—without breaking the backs of budgets or educators.

“An analysis of research conducted over a 35-year period demonstrates that schools that are highly effective produce results that almost entirely overcome the effects of student backgrounds.” - Bob Marzano, (2003)

Educators are generally aware of the impact inequity has on student learning but despite this awareness, too many schools lack a sense of urgency, work in isolation, point to students as the problem or dwell on circumstances beyond their control. In other words, these schools struggle to turn knowledge into action and operate without the intentionality, purpose and systemwide response needed to ensure all students learn to high levels. If we hope to fulfill Horace Mann’s vision for becoming the great equalizer of opportunity, schools must do as Anthony Muhammad suggests and adopt, “an unwavering set of collective beliefs and actions rooted in the goal of achieving high levels of academic and social success despite internal and external barriers” (Anthony Muhammad, Personal Communication, February 5, 2016, Phoenix, Arizona). ■

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