

A Rose by Any Other Name Professional Learning Communities

When visiting a school in the early stages of developing Professional Learning Communities (PLC), I heard the principal explain, “Our PLC teams meet twice a month.” He continued proudly, “When our PLC teams are meeting on the second and fourth Tuesday of every month, our school is *totally* devoted to the idea that all kids can learn.” I am confident this principal did not intend for his statement to spark my curiosity, but it made me wonder what his teachers are “totally devoted to” when they aren’t meeting in PLC teams.

I have never understood the rationale behind designating a team as the “PLC” team. Paul Farmer, a national consultant on developing Professional Learning Communities, observed that once faculty title a team meeting a “PLC” meeting, teachers talk about those meetings as if they are “magical,” but the notion that labeling a team or team meeting is somehow transformational misses the mark.

The truth is that teachers are members of all kinds of teams: grade-level teams, departmental teams, job-alike teams, child study teams, problem-solving teams, and a myriad of other teams. Simply adding “PLC” to the team name does nothing to improve a school. All it does is create another team!

When I asked this principal why designate these new team structures as PLC teams, he suggested that labeling the teams serves to create greater clarity around

their purpose. Though in theory this approach sounds good, in practice it has just the opposite effect. When we create separate labels for teacher teams, we invite confusion, not clarity.

Creating a new team structure inevitably generates questions. Teachers wonder, “Who will be on the new team?” “When will these new teams meet?” “What will the new team do?” All of these questions come from the teachers’ legitimate desire to understand how this new PLC team will affect their professional lives.

It takes time to articulate, clarify, reiterate, and respond to all of the questions. In fact, people create their own reality and if their questions and concerns are handled poorly, misinformation and misunderstanding can result. The upshot may be too much ambient information floating around the school.

Michael Fullan states, “Information overload breeds more confusion and clutter, not clarity”. (Fullan, *The Six Secrets of Change*, p. 94) Sooner or later, the debate begins about whether the issue at hand is appropriate for the PLC team or some other team. Confusion and frustration seem to follow inevitably, along with cynical observations like, “See?...PLCs don’t work!”

What is clear is that meaningful changes in practice—not labels—are the reason teams in a PLC are more successful. DuFour observed, “The pertinent question is not ‘Are teachers collaborating?’ but rather ‘What are teachers

collaborating about?’” (DuFour et al., *Learning By Doing*, p. 91) We know effective teams focus on improving student learning, so why not simply utilize existing team structures and focus on what *effective* teams do to help all kids learn?

If the fundamental purpose of a team is learning, the research is clear: effective teacher teams—whether labeled as PLC teams or otherwise—focus on clarifying essential outcomes by ► page 15

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During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Tom W. Many has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent; all at the elementary level! With a passion for promoting the development of high performing schools, his district was recently recognized as one of the highest achieving - lowest spending elementary school districts in Illinois.



Reach Out and Touch Someone: Principals Connect via Blogs

Remember AT&T’s slogan in the late 1970s? In the 30-second commercial, Ma Bell made perhaps her best attempt to sell telephone service by marketing an indispensable element of everyday life—the need to “Reach out and touch someone.” Principals are more connected to their school staffs than ever before with email and cell phones, yet they feel isolated from their principal peers. Blogs are one of the fastest growing means of connecting, sharing, and learning, and principals everywhere are taking advantage of this free social media to support their need to reach out and touch someone.

Revisiting Blogs 101

A blog is nothing more than a website providing commentary or news on a particular subject. Blogs are usually written by individuals seeking to share their thoughts and connect with others. You can subscribe to most blogs by using an RSS feed. You’ll save time and know immediately when new content has been added. See video explanations and read more about blogs and RSS feeds in the Technology section of TEPSA’s SchoolHouse Blog, www.tepsa.org.

Start Your Own Blog

It’s free and easy! Popular blog hosts include Word Press, TypePad and Blogger. Start a blog to communicate with your school family. See Mrs. G’s Twin Lake Elementary Principal’s Blog for ideas. Her blog provides information on school news, parenting, homework tips, and more. Blogging is a

great learning tool for your teachers and students, too. EduBlogs currently has almost 250,000 blogs written by students and teachers.

Visit www.tepsa.org for links to all blogs referenced in this article.

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Dr. Trae Kendrick is TEPSA’s Chief Learning Officer.

notable principal blogs

Practical Principals: What You Didn’t Learn in Grad School, <http://practicalprincipals.net>

The Principal Blog, <http://weprincipal.blogspot.com> (Note: Principal Miller also has another site, The Podcasting Principal, <http://principalmiller.podomatic.com>).

Practical Theory, <http://www.practicaltheory.org/serendipity>

TEPSA’s SchoolHouse Blog, http://tepsa.typepad.com/schoolhouse_blog

NAESP’s Principal’s Office, <http://naesp.typepad.com/blog>



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class, course or grade level. They spend time developing common formative assessments and establishing targets and benchmarks for their students. They come together to analyze assessment results and use the data to plan appropriate interventions and instructional improvement strategies.

We know students benefit when teachers work collaboratively toward the common goal of high levels of learning for all. Specifically, students benefit when teams of teachers focus on clarifying what kids should know and be able to do, create common formative assessments, design systematic pyramids of intervention, and provide more time and support to those students who don’t learn in the course of initial instruction. Finding answers to these critical questions *is* the work of an effective teacher team.

Students *and* teachers benefit when principals devote their energies to designating protected time for teams to meet during the school day, supporting the creation

of smart goals targeted at improving student learning, and designing strategies for monitoring the work of teams in order to articulate, protect, and promote what is important.

Creating new team structures with new names puts the focus on the wrong things. Principals should forget about what a team is called and focus instead on creating the conditions that maximize the effectiveness of the existing team. Likewise, principals should not allow the fact that PLC teams do not yet exist to delay the implementation of practices that improve student learning.

With his familiar words “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” Shakespeare reminds us that what something *is*—not what it is called—is what matters. Instead of creating another team, labeling it the “PLC” team, and attempting to define what this new team is supposed to do, principals would do well to help existing teams focus on promoting those activities that help all children learn. ■