

Best Practices/Tom W. Many, EdD

Reflective Audits Focus School Improvement

A Case Study of One School's Journey Towards Becoming a PLC

Fairview—a small, rural K-12 school in Allen Parish, Louisiana—was filled with dedicated, passionate teachers who shared a belief that *all* students can learn. The school had been working to establish professional learning communities but, like many schools across the country, had struggled with rigorous state accountability systems and mounting federal mandates.

School leaders found significant support for the theoretical underpinnings of professional learning communities, but roadblocks had surfaced around implementation. Structures were mislabeled and definitions were confusing. Practical examples of the three big ideas were missing or underdeveloped. Teachers needed help understanding key concepts, structures, and the vocabulary of professional learning communities.

Mindful of the urgency to improve, school leaders sought to identify the current reality around their PLC implementation. Principals and teachers looked for data and tangible evidence of progress that would help identify what next steps to take, but nothing was readily available. The decision was made to conduct an audit of their PLC practices.

A Reflective Audit Brings Next Steps Into Focus

A reflective audit involves faculty and staff in a process of self-study regarding the important structural and cultural

elements of a professional learning community. Teachers began the process by responding to a survey to assess their knowledge of PLC concepts. The survey was followed by onsite visits and interviews focused on the school's culture, attitudes and beliefs.

Teachers submitted a portfolio of school improvement plans and student achievement results. These artifacts were used to identify the presence of such important components as team norms, protocols and SMART goals. Examples of an agreed upon curriculum, common assessments and pyramids of intervention were also gathered for each grade level. Based on teacher interviews, analysis of the data, and review of the artifacts, a report summarizing what was found was written and published.

As the faculty examined the feedback generated by their own reflections, they identified several potential areas for improvement. Many recognized the need to build shared knowledge of PLC structures before making meaningful changes in their practice. Others identified the need for common language regarding important cultural and structural aspects of a PLC. Still others sought to create agreement on the questions fundamental to the daily work of PLCs: What should students be able to know and do as a result of this class? How will we know they have learned what was expected, and how will we respond when they do or do not learn what was expected?

The Impact of Reflecting on the Structures of a PLC

Like all states, the Louisiana State Department of Education had developed an exhaustive set of standards, but teachers found there simply was not enough time in the school day, school year or a student's academic career to ensure mastery of so many standards. Based on the feedback generated during the audit, teachers worked to identify a manageable number of standards—the essential outcomes each teacher would ensure their students learned.



Clarity around the standards created momentum for the development of a balanced and coherent system of assessment. As a result of the audit process, teachers realized assessment at Fairview School relied almost exclusively on summative assessments. The teachers worked to develop more frequent and formative assessments that identified which students needed more time and support and guided collaborative teams towards aspects of their instructional practice that needed improvement.

The faculty embraced common assessments that were more frequent and formative. Teachers began to use assessments created by teams of teachers, connected to the standards and administered at the same time to all students enrolled in the same class, course or grade level. With agreement in place on *what* students should learn and *how* well they had learned it, teachers turned their attention to the creation of schoolwide and systematic pyramids of intervention.

Many ideas were considered as teachers set out to create effective intervention plans. The presence of interventions not only benefited students; it also changed the culture of schools. Imagine students' reactions when it became clear that they were *required* to complete their homework and were *required* to attend tutorial sessions if they were not successful. The interventions conveyed the powerful message that learning was not optional. It was required!

The Impact of Reflecting on the Culture of a PLC

As significant as the structural changes were, the cultural shifts were even more dramatic. When one Fairview teacher was asked what had changed since the PLC initiative had begun, she replied that it was easier to describe what had *not* changed. She explained, "Gone are the days when I teach/you teach. Now 'WE' teach all students no matter what the subject matter." Another teacher reported relationships were far more professional and focused on student learning. "Our conversations are very different," she said. "We talk about learning everywhere; in the teacher's lounge, on the sidewalk before and after school, through emails and phone calls," she continued. "Our conversations are more focused on how to improve student learning, and we spend much less time complaining."

The small size of the faculty prompted teachers to create vertical teams. The presence of these collaborative teams meant that teachers no longer felt isolated or left to solve problems alone. As the principal remarked, "Our teachers realize they can bring their challenges to a group of fellow teachers and work together." He continued, "Teachers meet to examine student work and talk about strategies for re-teaching. We share a common goal that all our students will succeed and sometimes that means having to admit something doesn't work or accepting advice from others. That did not happen before we began working as a PLC."

The cultural shifts were not confined to the faculty; parents also viewed the school differently. As one staff member reported, "Parents are seeing interventions and appreciate the extra time spent with any students who needs extra help. They appreciate that teachers are working together for the good of all students and realize school is an important part of their children's lives. Parents see the entire faculty as having the children's best interests at heart and support the changes we are trying to make."

Responding to the Findings of the Reflective Audit

Student achievement improved as a result of the initial audit conducted in 2004. Ten years later, in 2014, Fairview School was designated as a school of Exemplary Academic Growth by the State of Louisiana and recognized as one of the best high schools (K-12) in America by *US News and World Reports* (bronze medal). Reflecting on their practice helped move Fairview School from conversation to action, from theory to practice, from knowing to *doing*. As teachers responded to the audit findings they acquired a deeper understanding of PLC practices, accepted the need for structural changes and committed to developing a collaborative culture. ■



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