



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“CRITICAL QUESTIONS” Series
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As the School Leader, What is My Role in Creating Professional Learning Communities?

Additional questions we often hear from school level leaders who want to create a professional learning community in their schools include, “*How do I create time for staff to work in professional learning communities?*” “*What are appropriate activities for staff to engage in through professional learning communities?*”

They are good questions to ask, but we may need to back up a bit, and begin by asking the question of *WHY* we want a professional learning community in our building and what we would expect as a result of developing these learning communities.

Purpose:

Understanding our purpose or intention helps determine the structure that makes the most sense. A professional learning community is not a book study, but studying a book to develop a shared understanding may support the goals of a learning community. If our purpose is to understand areas of student need, the principal leader can take an active role in securing data that will clearly illustrate the lens and illuminate the varying levels of needs that may exist. Once areas of student need are illuminated, the purpose may shift to developing appropriate interventions to meet the various needs identified. The learning community then shifts from a focus on looking at the needs to developing a response to the needs. This may include looking at curriculum and assessments to determine what interventions are needed to help students master standards or an examination of instructional practices that reach disenfranchised youth and how these practices are applied in our own classrooms. As time goes on, the learning community continues to shift its focus based on the evidence they gather and the changing priorities determined by that evidence.

Structure:

For a learning community to continually evolve, data are essential. The data should be gathered routinely and should represent credible evidence of the positive or negative impact of the effort in terms of student learning. Principal leaders can support this effort working with the learning communities to find time within the given calendar for groups to meet and to determine what evidence is needed. As Rick DuFour and Bob Eaker explain in their book *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (National Education Service, 1998) “Principals of professional learning communities involve faculty members in the school’s decision-making processes and empower individuals to act” (p185).

This involvement and empowerment means the principal needs to be clear about the non-negotiables of structuring learning within the school day, and trusting of staff to develop their own schedules for creating time for their learning in the school day. The National Staff Development’s *Journal of Staff Development* Spring 1999 issue (v.20, n.2) features several examples of creative ways in which staff have done just this without sacrificing time from instruction for students.

Participation:

The principal leader is ultimately responsible for removing barriers and creating the conditions that allow professional learning communities to thrive. The principal leader is often described as the keeper of the vision, and this is especially important for schools where professional learning communities thrive. The principal leader insures the vision is focused on each student and the evidence is based on improved learning for everyone in the school community. The principal provides information, clear expectations for outcomes, and acts as a regular observer, using the opportunity to better understand what the needs of his learning team and to act accordingly to support their learning.

Follow-Through:

We trust people who do what they say they are going to do. The principal leader models his or her integrity by following through on the commitments that are made. In a culture where professional learning communities thrive, the principal leader does not waver from the vision of improving learning for every student nor from the expectation that the learning community regularly engage in reviewing evidence of impact on student learning. This emphasis is best seen in the action orientation that refuses to accept student failure. The principal leader who holds him or herself accountable and the school community accountable to improve student learning continuously asks what evidence we have to show this is making a difference for each of our students.

The principal sets the tone for learning in his or her building. This learning includes his or her learning as well as the learning of the faculty and of course, the students. Through the day-to-day practices the principal engages in, he or she creates conditions to support a professional learning community. Through a balance of pressure to respond to student needs and support to provide the resources, instruction, and guidance to respond fully to students, the principal leader nurtures the conditions for successful professional learning communities.

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