The Capacity of a Professional Learning Community: Four Interconnected Factors

Four interconnected factors determine the capacity of a learning community. While each factor can be addressed individually to benefit student learning, maximum efficiency depends on finding connections between each area.

New Structures and Procedures

Highly functioning learning teams have formalized, collaborative ways of identifying essential learning goals, assessing the extent to which students have mastered those learning goals, and responding to differentiated student needs. Establishing structured procedures for each of these processes is essential for efficient collaboration.

Improved Communication

Teaching has long been defined by isolation. Educators have worked alone to address the needs of their students and rarely looked beyond their own classrooms. Schools functioning as PLCs see teachers engaged in frequent conversations, using communication to build shared understanding about teaching and learning. This collaborative work is built upon established systems for communication within and across learning teams.

Enhanced Teacher Learning

The most effective learning communities are defined by a spirit of reflection, an action orientation, and a focus on "collective inquiry" (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Teachers are continuously revisiting their instruction together, working to tailor practices to match the individual needs of the student population they serve. Instructional capacity improves as teachers share ideas across classrooms and as they experience systematic training in action research or support for National Board certification.

Collective Ownership and Intelligence

Teachers take ownership of all students and respond as a collective entity to challenges and opportunities. They make efforts to identify and then amplify instructional practices that work—and to eliminate those that are ineffective. Teams create warehouses of best practices that all members of a faculty can draw from to develop an understanding of student needs.

Student Learning

The primary goal of any learning community—improving student learning—is limited only by a school's ability to establish new structures, improve communication, enhance teacher learning, and develop collective intelligence.