

# Creating a Community of Professional Learners

## *An Inside View*<sup>1</sup>

By D'Ette Cowan

If you're like me, you often glance over announcements of new books from publishers to see what is capturing the attention of educators across the nation. In doing so, you've likely noticed an increased number of books on professional learning communities. Although I'm pleased that the concept is gaining the attention of educators, I'm often concerned when I hear the term used indiscriminately to describe any group of teachers that meets from time to time for any purpose whatsoever. In such instances, I worry that these meetings will lack clarity in their focus, norms to which teachers hold one another accountable, and processes for learning collectively and for constantly improving instructional practices. Without these critical aspects, the term *professional learning community* implies superficial interactions that fail to acknowledge the significant cultural shift that must occur for a school to operate in this way (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Shirley Hord, a pioneer in this approach and SEDL scholar emerita, notes that professional learning communities shape the ways schools operate on all levels:

In these schools, collaboration is the norm. It is characterized by the staff's interdependent relationships, with all individuals engaged in a common purpose and where people rely on each other to reach agreed-upon goals that they would not be able to achieve independently (Huffman & Hipp, 2003, p. x).

A professional learning community, thus, is an *infrastructure* that supports and nurtures continuous instructional effectiveness, and is not an end in itself.

Furthermore, it is not an endeavor separate from the total improvement effort, but rather a *means* to achieve high levels of student learning.

Although the literature provides descriptions of professional learning communities, it offers limited direction in how to create and sustain them. In this article, I describe the Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle (PTLC), a process for creating a professional learning community while focusing on a factor essential to reaching high levels of student learning—the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to state standards (Airasian, 2004; Cawelti, 2004; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Marzano, 2003). The process provides a structure for collaboration on teaching and learning that promotes continuous job-embedded professional development to improve teaching and learning (Cowan, 2006; Tobia, 2007).

### The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle

The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle (PTLC), originally developed as a joint effort by SEDL and the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2005),<sup>2</sup> consists of six steps: (1) study, (2) select, (3) plan, (4) implement, (5) analyze, and (6) adjust. Implementation of the PTLC is supported by three leadership strategies: communicating clear expectations, building capacity, and monitoring and reviewing.

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article appeared in the book Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B. (Eds.). (2010). *Demystifying professional learning communities: School leadership at its best*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Adapted with permission.

<sup>2</sup> The process has been refined and is now described in the following publication: Cowan, D., Joyner, S., & Beckwith, S. (2008). *Working Systemically in action: A guide for facilitators*. Austin, TX: SEDL.

## Step 1: Study

**In this step,** teachers work in grade-level, vertical, or departmental teams to examine and discuss student achievement data and learning expectations for selected state standards. Often the selection of standards for study is predicated by high or low student performance on annual or periodic standards-based assessments. The purpose of this collaboration is to develop a common understanding of

- the concepts and skills students need to know to meet the expectations in the standards;
- how the standards in a grade or course are assessed on state and local tests; and
- how the standards fit within a scope and sequence of the district curriculum (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, p. 178).

Examining standards and objectives on which students perform at a high level helps identify possible strengths in the curriculum, instructional resources, and strategies. Similarly, examining standards and objectives on which students perform at a low level helps identify possible weaknesses in the curriculum, instructional resources, and strategies. Often, these processes require paying close attention to the wording used in the standards and student learning expectations to determine critical concepts to be learned and skills to be mastered. Focusing attention on these concepts and skills helps build a shared understanding of how standards are connected across grade levels and subject areas.

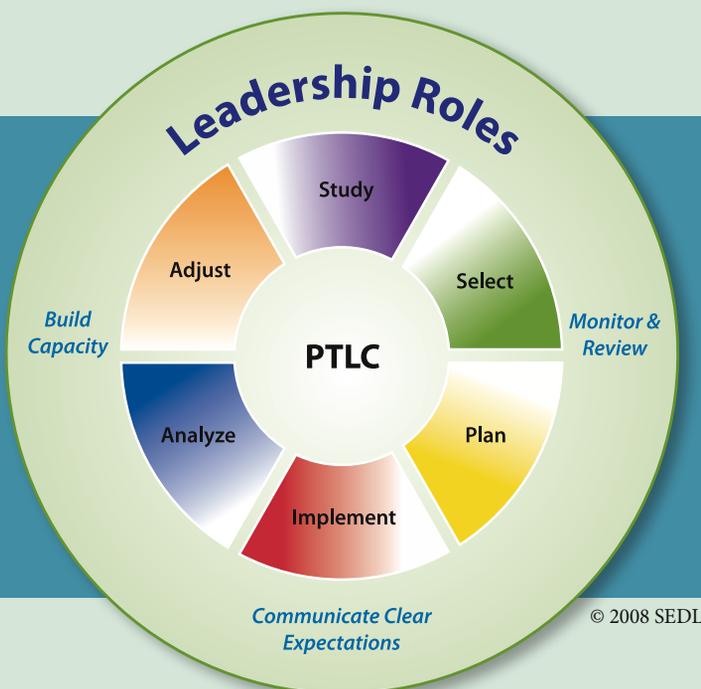
**Step 1 in Action.** Principal Tate at Cimarron Middle School has organized a campus leadership team charged with the primary responsibility for school improvement. The team is composed of teacher representatives from each of the four core areas (mathematics, reading/language arts, science, and social studies), as well as from fine arts, physical education, special education, and the bilingual/English as a second language program. A district-level math coach and a district-level literacy coach, who have curricular and instructional responsibilities, complete the team.

The leadership team meets on a regular basis each month to monitor the implementation of the campus improvement plan and to deliberate on significant issues as they arise. In recent years, the team's shared norms have helped it to explore a range of perspectives on key improvement initiatives and to prioritize school needs.

Now, at the beginning of the school year, the team examines the previous year's state test data and notes that student math performance is beginning to plateau. Team members discover that the school's previous achievement level in mathematics will not meet the state target at the end of the current year because performance standards have increased. The team identifies the level of proficiency it wants students to attain on the next state assessment. Principal Tate is somewhat surprised, and gratified, to see that teachers' expectations for math achievement in the next school year exceed the minimum state-level standards.

Later that week, Principal Tate and the math and literacy coaches meet with all the math teachers during their common planning period to discuss trends and patterns in math data over the past 3 years. The team identifies specific standards and objectives on which student performance has shown little or no improvement over that time period.

After collaborating, the coaches develop a plan for helping the math teachers dig more deeply into the state standards to identify the concepts and skills required for student proficiency in specific objectives. After comparing the concepts and skills in specific standards and objectives at the grade levels below and above the grade they teach, the math teachers become more aware of how concepts and skills are progressively built from grade to grade. Finally, the math coach directs teachers' attention to specific items on previous state assessments on which the objectives are tested. The coach emphasizes the prerequisite and problem-solving skills required of students in order to demonstrate proficiency on the objectives.



## Step 2: Select

**In this step,** teams investigate research-based strategies and resources needed to promote student mastery of the targeted standard(s). Teachers collaborate to

- identify effective research-based strategies and appropriate resources that will be used to support student learning of selected state standards; and
- agree on assessment techniques that will be used to provide evidence of student learning (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, p. 179).

This step requires instructional coaches and teachers to determine whether instructional strategies they have used in the past are supported in research and challenges them to adopt new and more effective strategies. As trust develops within teams, the teachers become more open to trying new strategies and reporting the outcomes to their colleagues.

**Step 2 in Action.** Following the meeting with the math teachers, Principal Tate asks the literacy and math coaches to work with the math teachers to develop a plan for professional development that builds teachers' capacity to provide effective instructional strategies on identified standards and learning objectives. The coaches are becoming increasingly aware of teachers' pedagogical needs and ways to help increase teachers' instructional effectiveness in these areas.

The coaches examine the district's benchmark assessments to see how students are being tested on the objectives throughout the school year. They discover a major discrepancy between the demands of the state assessment on measures of central tendency and how students are tested quarterly on local benchmarks. They set a date to discuss this inconsistency with the district's curriculum specialist in order to make needed changes on the local benchmark assessment. The math coach speculates that additional work will need to be done with math teachers to examine how students are being tested on this standard on weekly or unit tests.

The literacy coach focuses on strategies for teaching key vocabulary terms related to measures of central tendency and makes special note of how (or whether) these terms have been introduced in the district's scope and sequence. She identifies two research-based strategies for teaching these key terms and for helping students write cogent explanations and justifications for their problem solutions—a proficiency where performance had been notably lacking on the state assessment.

## Step 3: Plan

**In this step,** teachers collaborate to plan a formal lesson that incorporates selected research-based instructional strategies. They also agree on the type of student work they will collect and share with one another as evidence of student learning, as well as the criteria for measuring proficiency. In collaboration, teachers

- develop a common formal plan outlining the lesson objectives (relevant to the standards), the materials to be used, the procedures, the time frame for the lesson, and the activities in which students will be engaged; and
- decide what evidence of student learning will be collected during the implementation (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, p. 179).

Planning the lesson collaboratively is a critical feature of the PTLT. Through this process, teachers use their collective knowledge and experience to design a lesson that everyone understands and feels comfortable teaching, to formulate one or more measures of proficiency, and to identify common student work to collect across classrooms as evidence of learning.

**Step 3 in Action.** The math teachers at each grade level meet to develop a common lesson on measures of central tendency, which they agree to implement within a specified period of time. Having a common lesson for each grade level will give teachers a common frame of reference when they discuss the delivery and outcome of the lesson. It will also enable them to identify nuances of the lesson or classroom context that are associated with higher (or lower) student performance levels. The teachers decide they will begin by incorporating one of the new vocabulary strategies—the Frayer model—they learned from the literacy coach to ensure that students understand the terms *mean*, *median*, and *mode*.

Teachers first identify the lesson's major objectives that are critical to student proficiency in the standard and write these down. They want to ensure that students can compute these measures of central tendency using the same set of numbers and then justify which measure is best for particular situations. Teachers decide to use three word problems with different sets of numbers for students to calculate to determine the effectiveness of the lesson. The teachers also formulate a simple rubric for judging student proficiency on written justifications of the best measure of central tendency to use for each word problem. The teachers decide to spend 3 days of instruction on the concept of measures of central tendency and design an informal assessment to administer at the end of the third day. They then agree to bring 10 randomly selected samples of student work from this assessment back to the group for closer examination.

## Step 4: Implement

**In this step**, teachers present the planned lesson, make note of their successes and challenges, and collect evidence of student work. They

- deliver the lesson as planned within the specified time period;
- record the results, especially noting where students struggled or where instruction did not achieve expected outcomes; and
- collect the agreed-upon evidence of student learning to take back to the collaborative planning team (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, p. 179).

This step places the teacher in the role of an action researcher who collects data to reveal successes and challenges in the lesson. This process encourages active reflection to promote ongoing self-assessment and internal dialogue about the lesson as it was planned and presented.

**Step 4 in Action.** Using the plans they developed together, the math teachers return to their classrooms and teach the lesson over a 3-day period. They incorporate the Frayer model graphic organizer to help students understand the three measures of central tendency. Teachers also use the rubric they developed to evaluate student justifications for the best measure of central tendency to use in different contexts. Throughout, the teachers note aspects of the lesson that went as expected, as well as unanticipated occurrences. They also make note of specific areas they or their students found particularly challenging or easy and record them. These notes will be useful when teachers meet again to examine student work in Step 5. The teachers collect student work from the informal assessment and randomly select 10 samples to bring back to the group.

## Step 5: Analyze

**In this step**, teachers meet to examine the student work they collected to serve as evidence of student understanding of the standards. Teachers work together to

- revisit and familiarize themselves with the targeted standards before analyzing the student work;
- analyze a sampling of student work for evidence of student learning;
- discuss whether students have met the expectations outlined in the standards;
- make inferences about the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of instruction; and
- identify what students know and what skills or knowledge needs to be strengthened in future lessons (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, pp. 179–180).

The most important aspect of this step is the dialogue that occurs about lesson effectiveness as reflected in the student work. Whether conducted through formal or informal processes, the focus of examination is not on teacher evaluation but rather on lesson effectiveness.

**Step 5 in Action.** At the specified time, the math teachers reconvene to examine samples of student work. The math and literacy coaches also attend this meeting primarily to lead the discussion on student work and to ask probing questions as teachers are learning how to establish a culture of respectful critical inquiry. The literacy coach listens for indicators that teachers have provided a sound foundation on essential vocabulary for the lesson by using the Frayer model. The math coach is interested in hearing teachers' perspectives about how the student work enhances the development of critical math concepts and reflects effective pedagogy. Although coaches are prepared to lead the discussion in the initial meetings, they realize that their presence at every meeting in the future will not be so essential as teachers become more adept at the process of analyzing student work in an objective and respectful manner.

Before the team analyzes the student work, the coaches have the math teachers shield the students' names from view. This anonymity helps prevent preconceived notions about individual student competency based on past achievement or other factors from creeping into the assessment of the work.

Next, the math teachers at each grade level combine the samples of student work from the informal assessment into one stack of papers. The coaches have the teachers review the objectives of the lesson on measures of central tendency as specified in Step 3. The teachers also refer to the rubric they developed to ensure that indicators of proficiency on the written justifications are still appropriate. The teachers work together to review each piece of student work and place it into one of three stacks: (1) students who excelled in meeting all the learning objectives; (2) students who show proficiency in most of the learning objectives; and (3) students who are clearly far from meeting the learning objectives. The coaches help prevent the conversation from drifting toward factors other than the work that is before the teachers.

Then, looking at each stack, the teachers identify the overall characteristics that are reflected and what elements of the commonly planned lesson might have influenced the student learning results. Teachers may want to speculate about anything that occurred in their classrooms during the lesson that might have influenced the results.

The teachers also examine each stack for any trends or patterns in strengths and errors, and discuss what it would take to move student work in that stack to the next level. Although the focus of the conversation is on lesson effectiveness, the teachers realize they also can use information in these stacks to group students for enrichment or additional instruction.

## Step 6: Adjust

**In this step**, teachers reflect on the implications arising from the analysis of student work. They discuss alternative instructional strategies or modifications to the original strategy that may better promote student learning. In collaboration, teachers

- reflect on their common or disparate teaching experiences;
- consider and identify alternative instructional strategies for future instruction;
- refine and improve the lesson; and
- determine when the instructional modifications will take place, what can be built into subsequent lessons, and what needs an additional targeted lesson (Cowan, Joyner, & Beckwith, 2008, p. 180).

Instruction is constantly evolving during this step as teachers design the most effective lessons possible. Follow-up instruction also becomes strategic in nature as decisions are made about which students need additional instruction and how this instruction should be provided.

**Step 6 in Action.** The math and literacy coaches next guide the conversation toward possible changes that could be made to the lesson to increase its effectiveness. The coaches also help the teachers see where small groups of students might be formed for immediate instruction on critical aspects of the learning objectives that were missed. In addition, the coaches help the teachers plan how to integrate the missed objectives into future lessons. These measures increase the efficiency of the instructional program by targeting the specific learning needs of students and reducing the number of students who need additional instruction. Throughout this process, the coaches communicate with Principal Tate and make recommendations for ways to continue to support teacher effectiveness.



## Conclusion

The PTLC provides an ongoing, job-embedded strategy for increasing the alignment of instruction and assessment to state standards and local curriculum. The process itself offers a means for promoting a community of professional learners by fostering effective collaboration, collective learning, and shared personal practice. Furthermore, this process focuses professional development to provide continual support and assistance in building teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge and skills. The leadership roles that support the implementation of the PTLC are critical to its success. As the PTLC graphic on page 21 illustrates, leaders must clearly communicate, through both words and actions, their expectations for collaboration focused on student learning goals. Leaders must also continuously seek ways to build the capacity of instructional staff to implement each step of the PTLC successfully. In some cases, pedagogical and content skills need to be improved; in other cases, interpersonal skills. Finally, leaders must develop a system for reviewing formative and summative data pertinent to the implementation of the PTLC and its impact on students. These data provide important information about where to commit additional resources and how to ensure learning opportunities of the highest order for all students.

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*D'Ette Cowan is a project director with SEDL's Texas Comprehensive Center. She has an EdD in educational administration. You may reach D'Ette at dette.cowan@sedl.org.*