

BUILDING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY
IN A RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT: AN EVALUATIVE INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

This inquiry explored the implementation of the professional learning communities (PLC) model using a utilization-focused (Patton, 1997) inquiry approach in order to provide feedback to enhance the development of the PLC model in five schools in one district in rural Missouri to increase the probability that the PLC model will result in improved student achievement. Experts identified in current literature have concluded that schools demonstrating high achievement exhibit the characteristics of PLC. This inquiry explored the development of the core principles of a PLC including the identification of facilitators and barriers to the process. As a result of a district-wide initiative in a rural school district, a high school, middle school and three elementary buildings implemented the PLC reform process with assistance from a regional consultant. Leadership Teams were trained in the PLC process and led the implementation process at each building. In conjunction with the PLC implementation, the district also began a district-wide late start initiative to provide time for teacher collaboration. Qualitative data was collected through focus groups, interviews and document review regarding the PLC implementation and the current operations in the school. Data from each school is shared separately followed by an analysis of common themes across schools, thus highlighting the similarities and differences in the

implementation of PLCs in the various school contexts within the same school district. Data analysis revealed three common themes across the buildings including concepts of collaboration, time as a resource and the function of leadership. Identification of motivating factors as well as barriers to the implementation of a PLC is examined. An in-depth look at the implementation of the PLC process is explored at each building including providing a brief background on the school setting and student achievement results. The findings of this evaluative inquiry demonstrated the concept that even with the same technical assistance, implementing a PLC process is context specific. The three elementary buildings had greater success in the development of the core PLC principles although they were not without conflict. The middle school had the lowest level of implementation followed by the high school. The data demonstrated that the Leadership Teams had a greater understanding of PLC in these buildings but the collaborative culture that signifies a PLC has not yet emerged except in pockets.