THE ROLE OF DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION
IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to focus on outcomes, behaviors, and attitudes which have occurred or been developed in schools which have successfully implemented Professional Learning Communities (PLC). The researcher also studied the role of the district administration in assessing the readiness for change as well as their role in the implementation and support for PLC.

The three school districts selected for this study were considered representative of the state from which they were selected because geographically the nine RPDC areas from which the schools were selected represent a cross section of all districts in the state. A superintendent or superintendent designee and one board member from the three different school districts were selected to participate in interviews. In addition, a focus group from each district was selected including representatives from the PLC leadership teams of the individual schools. Data collection methods included audio-recording interviews and observations of individuals in the school setting. The study findings revealed four themes. They were: 1) the changing dynamics of leadership, 2) the development of a sense of collective efficacy and responsibility for student learning, 3) emphasis on collaborative teams versus isolation, and 4) the use of data to drive improved instruction. The implications of this inquiry for practice in education could

impact K-12 institutions as they attempt to address the pressures of improving student

achievement.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

Educational professionals can no longer ignore the growing pressures to address accountability issues. With the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, the federal government initiated a plan which will not only challenge public school districts to offer a better education for their students, but provides sanctions which will force schools to offer additional tutoring, allow students to transfer from underperforming schools, revamp district curriculum, remove ineffective teachers or administrators and could eventually lead to closing individual schools or entire school districts (Aldridge, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Meier, 2004).

Numerous reform movements have served as a backdrop to address the needs of students since the inception of public education. During the 1890's and the first half of the 1900's, the Progressive Movement featured debate about the purpose of public education (Paris, 1995; Ravitch, 2000). While some scholars suggested the purpose of public education was to prepare students for college, others argued the function of the educational system was to prepare students to be productive citizens in our society (Berube, 1994). While the Progressive Movement tried to answer questions concerning the purpose of education, the Equity Reform Movement concentrated on providing opportunities for all students regardless of race, gender, wealth, or family status (Oakes & Rogers, 2005; Ravitch, 2000). Even though the *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* decision outlawed discrimination, obstacles remained such as cultural norms and political struggles (Berube, 1994; Ravitch, 2000).

Though the Equity Reform Movement was successful in providing opportunities for most students, public education began to come under increasing scrutiny as the Excellence Movement began with a report entitled *A Nation at Risk.* This report placed blame for societal problems on public education, citing international comparisons of test scores, high rates of adult illiteracy, and the rising needs for remedial programs (Berube, 1994; Viteritti, 2004). While some reforms generated by *A Nation at Risk* were successful, other additional attempts to mandate education improvement were unsuccessful due in part to the fact they did not consider the expertise of those required to implement the changes (Berube, 1994; Ravitch, 2000).

Passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* in 2001 resulted in the largest effort by the federal government to influence public education (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Meier, 2004). The NCLB Act had some effects viewed as positive by many scholars including mandating disaggregation of test data by race and handicapping conditions and insisting on quality teachers for all students (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004). But the most controversial components of NCLB are the sanctions associated with poor performance by students on standardized tests. While these sanctions definitely created a sense of urgency for many districts, they do little by themselves to provide avenues to improve student achievement (Bracey, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2007).

While the various reform movements have resulted in change in our schools, these changes have not resulted in positive achievement gains (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). Many within the education community have been reluctant to embrace change. They often become defensive and blame the problems of public education on factors beyond their control (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Too often educators jump from one reform movement to another, showing an inability to stay the course (Schlechty, 1997). Teachers become comfortable in their current status and become unwilling to undergo the insecurity and

anxiety often associated with change (Blankstein, 2004). Administrators point to teacher tenure laws as a roadblock to instituting meaningful change (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Securing meaningful change to address students' needs is hard work and educators often take the easier path (Blankstein, 2004, Schmoker, 2006). With the ever changing political climate and accompanying accountability issues, the easier road may be a thing of the past.

With accountability issues looming, it is imperative for schools to identify and implement the components of successful change. In order to implement successful change it is essential for school leaders to create a sense of urgency, showing the stakeholders the importance of change (Schmoker, 2006; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). According to Collins (2001, p. 65), they must be willing to face the "brutal facts." The next step in the process is the development of a vision which paints the picture of what we can become (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Development and dissemination of the vision sets the tone for the success of any change initiative (Kotter, 1996). A key component often absent during unsuccessful change attempts is the development of a collaborative culture. Leaders must recognize the importance of life-long learning, encourage risk-taking and expand the leadership capacity of their organizations (Kotter, 1996; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). To meet these challenges several researchers have promoted the development and implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PCL) in order to address these and other issues of successful changes (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2006; Joyce, 2004).

Moreover, if an organization is to be successful, leadership must not be confined to a single person (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001; Fullan, 2005; Lambert, 1998; Lambert, 2003). Leadership must in fact extend to all stakeholders, and leaders in traditional roles (building and district administrators) must abandon their view of leadership as one of power and authority (Fullan, 2005; Lambert, 2006). In schools which have this high leadership capacity, features such

as a shared vision, reflective practice, collaboration and collective responsibility for student achievement are apparent (Newman & Wehlege, 1995). Therefore, it is essential for school personnel to move away from developing and supporting autocratic administrators, and begin providing opportunities to develop leadership skills among all staff members (Lambert, 2003).

This leadership capacity can be enhanced through the overriding characteristics of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) including the ability to monitor student learning and make adjustments to instruction to meet the needs of the students who are not initially successful (Buffum & Hinman, 2006a; Schmoker, 2006). This leadership capacity occurs when all staff members are willing to take responsibility for student learning (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Ultimately adjustments to instruction occur through the process of collaboration where the teachers meet in core area teams to determine standards, develop common assessments, and make adjustments in their instruction based on the results of the common assessments (Blankstein, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). Thus according to Dufour and Eaker (1998), "Collaboration is the single most important factor for successful school improvement" (p. 117).

Additionally, district administrators must create conditions which foster the development of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2002). In order to accomplish this, they must develop a capacity for change by encouraging reading, attending conferences, visiting similar schools, participating in ongoing dialogue and empowering the staff (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2002, 2008). Furthermore, the district focus must be on the improvement of instruction, including administrative team meetings which no longer concentrate on administrative tasks, but emphasize the improvement of instruction (Schlechty, 2002; Schmoker, 2006). There also must be solidarity among district administrators as they work as a collaborative team in creating a narrow focus on instruction and eliminating initiatives which do

not support this focus (Patterson, et al, 2008; Schlechty, 2005). Therefore, if PLC and change are to be successful, it is incumbent upon the superintendent to develop relationships with building administrators as they work collaboratively to improve student achievement (Schlechty, 2002).

Conceptual Underpinnings of the Study

Three concepts were reviewed through the literature review to examine the methods, processes, and practices used to improve student achievement. They included accountability, leadership, and the impact of the establishment of Professional Learning Communities on change. Ultimately the review of literature revealed that the role of district leadership is essential and warrants investigation.

Accountability

Although NCLB has re-focused the spotlight on accountability issues, accountability has been in the forefront of public school discourse almost from the onset of public education. For years, the discussions centered on what the purpose of education were, ranging from preparing students for college to producing citizens in our society (Berube, 1994). Consequently, the equity reform movement, which started with the *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education,* helped center the discussions on whom schools were supposed to educate (Ravitch, 2000) and the resultant legislation and court decisions concentrated on providing opportunities for all students regardless of race, nationality, or learning disability (Berube, 1994).

Moreover, with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the public began to place blame on education for many of society's problems (Berube, 1996). Furthermore, critics cited comparisons on international test scores, declining scores on college entrance exams, and the need for remedial programs as evidence of the poor quality of public education (Berube, 1994); Viteretti, 2004). More than 300 reports have been generated, many citing the need for more

rigor, longer school days, and increased high school graduation requirements. Many business leaders have testified in favor of education legislation which increased the influence of the federal government on public education (Berends, 2004; Ravitch, 2000).

Later federal efforts to become involved in public education lessened during the Clinton administration. President Clinton was instrumental in the development of Goals 2000 which developed long-range goals for education including "1) all children will start school ready to learn, 2) high school graduation will increase to at least 90 percent, and 3) every adult in America will be literate" (Paris, 1995, p. 7). This legislation ultimately changed with the passage of the bi-partisan NCLB in 2001 which brought accountability issues to the forefront for all school leaders.

Leadership

Eventually when an organization attempts to institute change, leadership is essential if the change is to be successful. The traditional view of a leader is that of a bold-oriented figure who solves problems and uses personality to recruit others (Collins, 2001). However, current research has revealed the importance of distributing leadership throughout an organization (Fullan, 2006). Thus the school leader must work to create a culture conducive to learning and teaching that is supported by leaders throughout the school setting. In other words successful organizations develop leaders and promote individuals with capacity to lead (Fullan, 2005).

While some school organizations have moved toward leadership teams as a way to distribute leadership, it is only when all members of the organization accept the collective responsibility of leadership that they move beyond the implementation stage toward sustained improvement (Newman & Wehlage, 1995). For this to happen, it is essential for teachers to be willing to accept leadership roles, for school personnel to move away from the employment and

support of autocratic administrators, and for schools to provide opportunities for teachers to develop leadership skills (Lambert, 2003).

According to several education authors (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001; Fullan, 2005; Lambert, 2003), the success of an organization depends upon the ability to make the concept of leadership broad-based, and not confined to a single individual. This leadership capacity allows the organization to sustain itself. These high leadership capacity schools are characterized by a shared vision, reflective practice, collaboration, and collective responsibility (Lambert, 2003). Thus, according to Lambert (2003), "Leadership capacity was realized when a school staff has undertaken skillful work using inquiry, dialogue and reflection to achieve student performance goals" (p. 5). And one way to implement this dialogue and reflection is through the process of Professional Learning Communities (Dufour, et.al. 2002).

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) have been viewed by many as the best process to stimulate significant improvement in our educational system (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2002; Schmoker, 2006). Research indicated factors influencing positive change include building consensus, patience, a collaborative culture, training and follow-up (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Also successful change includes developing a sense of urgency, confronting the brutal facts, developing a vision, and communicating the vision to all stakeholders (Collins, 2001; Schmoker, 2006).

Most of the components of successful change are similar to characteristics of PLC. The basic principles of PLC include deciding what students need to know, assessing their level of mastery, and making adjustments to instruction when students do not learn (Buffum & Hinman, 2006a; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). All of this comes together once staff members

are willing to accept collective responsibility for the learning of all students (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). This allows the school to raise the level of expectations and assist in meeting the ever-increasing demands placed upon public schools (Blankstein, 2004).

A similarity in a positive change process and PLC is the development of a collaborative culture. Collaboration is viewed as the cornerstone of PLC and represents a paradigm shift way from a culture of isolation to a culture of working together to solve problems and improve instruction (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The entire work of PLC is a collaborative endeavor as teachers effectively develop shared attitudes, and beliefs, develop high levels of trust, and have authority to make important decisions (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006).

Although PLC has growing support in the education community from authors and practitioners, research needs to continue to monitor the outcomes of a Professional Learning Community, especially from the focus of the role of district leadership and how that support or lack thereof, affects sustaining necessary and needed reform. As accountability pressures grow in public schools, educators will continue to search for answers and school district leadership's implementation and support of PLC could be one solution.

Statement of the Problem

Accountability for student learning is here! It is an issue public school educators can no longer ignore. The increased pressures on schools to improve student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Meier, 2004) began in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* and has gained momentum with the passage of *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* in 2001. The myriad of change initiatives, while showing modest improvement gains, have not resulted in the kinds of system-wide changes needed to overhaul public education (Blankstein, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). While the literature has revealed much debate about the reason for the failure of these initiatives,

little research has been conducted that examines the role of the district leadership on the sustainability of these reforms. Additionally many educators have taken a dim view of reform movements, preferring to maintain the status quo, even making the argument change is not necessary (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Coupling this attitude by educators with the growing lists of challenges facing school districts such as increased student poverty, continued decline of family values, and the influx of non-English speaking students (Blankstein, 2004; Schmoker, 2006), the need to examine how to sustain these change initiatives is apparent.

While more research is necessary, Professional Learning Communities (PLC) are viewed by many authors and educators as the most promising way to improve the quality of education of students (Blankstein, 2004; Buffum & Hinman, 2006a; Schmoker, 2006). PLC changes the focus in schools from emphasis on teaching to concentration on student learning (Blankstein, 2004). Furthermore, the key tenets of PLC include identifying desired outcomes, providing assessment to evaluate student proficiency, and making necessary adjustments to assure mastery for all students (Buffum & Hinman, 2006a; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). In order for this to occur, all staff members must first be willing to accept responsibility for student learning, and move from past practices which looked to place the blame for lack of learning on factors outside the school's control (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Consequently, in any change process, leadership is essential in order for the change to be successful. Research revealed that in order for change to be successful and lasting, leadership must not be centered on any one individual, but distributed throughout the organization (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001; Fullan, 2005; Lambert, 1998). And while building leadership (both from an administrator and building staff) has been studied successfully, little has been written about the role of the district administration.

For these reform efforts to be successful in a school district, support from the district administration must occur. The administration must create a sense of urgency for change as well as creating conditions which foster the development of PLC (Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2002). They must take the lead in finding and developing resources to support the process. District administrators must create a narrow focus on the change initiative and eliminate other distractions and initiatives which do not support the change (Schlechty, 2002). Therefore, the overarching question guiding this study is: What role does the district administration play in the development, success, and sustainability of Professional Learning Communities?

Purpose of the Study

The passage of the *No Child Left Behind* Act in 2001 has increased accountability requirements for public school districts (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Meier, 2004). Educational researchers have promoted the development and implementation of Professional Learning Communities in order to improve student achievement and address these accountability issues (Blankstein, 2004; Buffum & Hinman, 2006a; Schmoker, 2006). Thus the purpose of this study was to focus on outcomes, behaviors, and attitudes which have occurred or been developed in schools who have successfully implemented PLC. The researcher has also studied the role of the district administration in assessing the readiness for change as well as their role in the implementation and support for PLC.

The investigator of this study viewed Professional Learning Communities through the use of focus groups, observation, and interviews, seeking an understanding of the role of district administration. This role was studied to assess the importance of the district-wide commitment to this organizational change. This study will add to the body of knowledge concerning district

leadership in PLC and assist future school districts looking for models of how to improve student achievement.

Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to examine the changes which occurred in schools as a result of the implementation of Professional Learning Communities. The synthesis of the literature revealed many education authors and researchers recognize the single best hope for significant school improvement is strategies commonly associated with Professional Learning Communities. The study also looked at the role the district administration played in the implementation of Professional Learning Communities and the strategies used in this support. The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. What role did the district administration play in the development of the individual schools as Professional Learning Communities?

2. What initial and continued strategies were used by district administration to support the transition of individual schools from traditional teaching environments to Professional Learning Communities?

3. How was the readiness for change assessed by district administration?

4. What outcomes have occurred due to the implementation of Professional Learning Communities?

5. Has the establishment of Professional Learning Communities had an impact on the behaviors and attitudes of the certified staff?

Limitations and Assumptions

The following are limitations identified for the study and should be considered throughout the remainder of the research:

1. One limitation within this inquiry is the use of a case study design. However the researcher interviewed a wide range of stakeholders for the data collection which enhanced the reliability of the data.

2. The study of three school districts limits the ability to generalize findings. Merriam (1998) wrote, however, that qualitative research is not intended to generalize findings, but to interpret the events.

3. The success of PLC in school districts is based on the judgment of the RPDC representatives.

4. In a qualitative approach to methodology, validity is tied to the competence and integrity of the researcher (Patton, 1997). Trustworthiness in the researcher may affect the overall credibility of the study.

5. The study is limited within the framework of the questions asked of three school districts within the state of Missouri.

6. The researcher assumed the participants were forthright in their responses and interpreted the interview questions as intended.

Design Controls

As the primary instrument, this researcher was aware of the potential for researcher bias and subjectivity. However the use of thick, rich information from multiple sources such as faculty focus groups, individual interviews with administrators and board members, collaboration meetings, and written documentation of past meetings allowed the researcher to triangulate the data. Furthermore, the goal of this researcher was to add to the existing body of knowledge regarding Professional Learning Communities and their influence on positive change rather than to pass judgment. Additionally, detailed field notes, inclusive of reflections regarding

personal subjectivity served as a guard against personal bias. Consistency in data collection was established by the use of one researcher exclusively gathering the data. And to enhance the reliability of the participants' responses the interview scripts were presented to participants for feedback. This process of member checking enhanced the data.

To further control for limitations within this inquiry a multiple level process for participation selection was utilized. Since the data collected were used to describe the school organizations as a representation of the school districts various sampling techniques were used to produce a representative sample (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

Definition of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, commonly used terms were defined as follows:

Adequate Yearly Progress "AYP." AYP, a cornerstone of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, is an annual measure of student progress and achievement of statewide assessments and other academic indicators (U. S. Congress, (2002).

Celebration. The recognition of the collective accomplishments of individuals or groups who have contributed to the school or school district (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 1998).

Collaboration. A systematic process in which people work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008).

Curriculum. What the students are expected to know and to be able to do at various grade levels. This should be consistent with state standards and standards established by local school boards (Schlechty, 2002).

District Leadership. This leadership team includes the board of directors and central office administration and is viewed as responsible for school district success.

Goals. These are measurable milestones that can be used to assess progress in advancing toward a vision (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008).

Highly qualified teacher. According to NCLB, a teacher is high qualified who has fulfilled the state's certification and license requirements, obtained at least a bachelor's degree, and demonstrated subject matter expertise (United States Congress, 2002).

Intervention strategies. A systematic plan to address students who are not demonstrating learning at the level of expected performance (Blankstein, 2004).

Leadership capacity. A concept of leadership that is "broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership" (Lambert, 2003, p. 4) and is an organizational concept referring to the organization's ability to lead itself and to sustain that effort when key individuals leave the organization.

Leadership team. A group of individuals highly committed to the general well being of the school who participate in the significant decisions affecting the school (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

Professional Development. A lifelong, collaborative learning process that nourishes the growth of individuals, teams, and the school through a daily, job-embedded, learner-centered focused approach (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008).

Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Schools where teachers pursue a clear, shared purpose for all students' learning, engage in collaborative activity to achieve their stated purpose, and take collective responsibility for student learning (Blankstein, 2004).

Readiness for Change. Organizations are ready for change if they understand the need (urgency) and have developed a guiding coalition to lead the change (Kotter 1996).

Traditional Teaching Environment – Describes schools which place emphasis on teaching (not learning), instruction is teacher-centered, teachers work in isolation, and student lack of success is blamed on factors outside the control of the school (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008).

Vision. A realistic, credible, attractive future for an organization (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008).

Summary

Professional Learning Communities have been described by many as the best chance for school success in improving student achievement. With increased accountability, schools are challenged to improve test scores or face sanctions as part of the bi-partisan *No Child Left Behind Act.* PLC combines a number of practices to form a collaborative team to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLC clearly defines what students need to know, provides assessments of their learning, and makes the necessary adjustments to instruction in order for all students to be successful. While several investigations on the outcomes and impact of PLCs in individual schools have been conducted, few significant studies have been conducted on the roles and responsibilities of district leadership in the implementation of PLC.

In Chapter Two, the outcome of an expansive literature review search is provided which focuses on the following: (a) history of school reform, (b) schools and change, (c) barriers to change, (d) successful changes, (e) leadership, (f) Professional Learning Communities, (g) leadership and PLC, (g) leadership capacity, and (h) central office leadership. A description of the research design and methodology is presented in Chapter Three. Comprised in Chapter Four is the presentation and analysis of data with discussion of findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research being described in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The history of American public education has been marked by numerous attempts at reform to answer accountability issues brought about by public concern, and the number of these reform movements has accelerated during the second half of the twentieth century and into the early years of the twenty-first century (Berube, 1994; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Paris, 1995; Ravitch, 2000). During the latest reform movements, educators and their critics have argued about the quality of the schools. Reformers question whether schools are as good as they used to be and whether they are as good as they should be (Ravitch, 2000). Education has been viewed by many as a means by which individuals can make a better life for themselves. Using this as a leading argument, Congress and several American Presidents have passed legislation such as the *Improving America's Schools Act* of 1994, *Goals 2000* and *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001, which all proposed to assure a quality education for all students regardless of their race, nationality or learning disability (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004).

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) is viewed by many education scholars as the best process to stimulate significant improvement in the educational system (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities by examining the process and supports the district level leadership team provided for implementation, the initial strategies used to support Professional Learning Communities, and the outcomes perceived by the stakeholders.

Specifically, in Chapter 2, current literature is examined to assist in the development of this study, which is to investigate the use of school improvement initiatives (PLC) to equip

schools and school districts to better meet the needs of their students. First, various reform movements and their impetuses will be discussed as they relate to previous attempts to improve public education. Further review will focus on challenges currently facing public schools and examine change theory including factors which impede change. In the final section, traits and qualities of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) will be discussed.

History of Reform Movements

Since the inception of public education, there have been numerous reform movements that have occurred as school personnel strived to meet the ever-increasing needs of their students. For the purpose of this review, three different historical movements: the Progressive Movement, the Equity Reform Movement and the Excellence Movement, all of which have informed the current status of school reform, will be discussed.

The Progressive Movement

The ushering in of the Progressive Movement can be traced to a series of articles published by Dr. Joseph Mayer Rice. Dr. Rice was a pediatrician who had developed an interest in education by studying education methods in Germany from 1888 to 1890. Rice's articles, published later in a book called *The Public School System of the United States,* shocked the nation and led to the commission of Rice by authors of the *Forum* magazine to assess the state of education in a national study (Berube, 1994). His study had severe limitations in that he made no attempt to quantify his data, relying solely on qualitative data.

Subsequently there was additional debate about the education system, particularly by two of the most influential educators of the 1890's, Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard University and William Torrey Harris, U.S. Commissioner of Education. They both believed the main purpose of education was to improve society by improving the intelligence of individuals. Eliot

(1961) noted, "We Americans habitually underestimate the capacity of pupils at almost every stage of education" (p. 52-53). In his opinion, low expectations were a primary cause of low student performance.

Eliot and Harris were members of the "Committee of Ten", the nation's first blue-ribbon commission to study schools (Paris, 1995). The committee published its report in 1893 and championed the belief that all high schools should be committed to academic excellence for all students in a democratic society. The report of the committee stated all children would benefit from a liberal education of the highest quality; high schools did not exist for the purpose of preparing students for college, and the committee recommended active teaching methods instead of rote memorization (Paris, 1995; Ravitch, 2000). The report came under fire from opposite directions including both traditionalists and classicists. G. Stanley Hall, president of Clark University in Massachusetts, derided the report, declaring teaching methods need to be different for students of different levels (Hall, 1904). Baker (1892) insisted, "Power comes through knowledge; we cannot conceive of observation and memory in the abstract" (p. 57).

Others took up the banner of Progressive education during the early 1900's but the individual whose name is synonymous with progressive education was John Dewey. A social activist whose major education work is *Democracy and Education,* he condemned the lecture method as meaningless, proposing a classroom social environment whereby learning is achieved through doing. Dewey (1931) stated, "No thought, no idea can possibly be conveyed from one person to another" (p. 188). Dewey was always concerned with how democracy could be furthered by education, although his discussions of education also reflected social and political concerns (Dewey, 1931). Dewey also opened a laboratory school at the University of Chicago to

test his theories and ideas about education. He believed students should enjoy school and they must learn to work with each other.

Another proponent of progressive education was the Progressive Education Association (PEA). The PEA was founded in 1919 by educators and concerned parents as an association of those interested in education, but soon was taken over by progressive education reformers from Teachers College, Columbia University (Berube, 1994). It was dominated by professors from the College and the leadership of the National Education Association. The association propagated progressive education ideas that were held by many during the first half of the 20th century (Berube, 1994). The PEA, however, struggled with an inability to fix on a clear education mission and ceased to exist in 1959 (Berube, 1994; Ravitch, 2000).

As the progressive education era came to a close in the 1950's it came under attack after the Soviets launched Sputnik and the American education system became the target of new calls for reform. President Eisenhower called for a return to fundamentals, signaling the end of the progressive era (Berube, 1994; Paris, 1995). John Dewey became the chief target, blamed for stunting the growth of education (Berube, 1994, Paris, 1995). While the progressive era was coming to a close in the 1950's, the equity reform movement was being ushered in by the *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* decision (Berube, 1994; Oakes & Rogers, 2005; Ravitch, 2000).

The Equity Reform Movement

The greatest Civil Rights victory of the 1950's was the United States Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* decision which spelled the end of state-imposed racial segregation (Oakes & Rogers, 2005; Ravitch, 2000). This decision provided the impetus and backdrop for the Equity Reform Movement. Sociologists studied social inequality and the quality of education for minorities and poor people, finding wide gaps in achievement, drop-out

rates and school conditions (Berube, 1994, Oakes & Rogers, 2005, Ravitch, 2000). Even though *Brown vs. Topeka* outlawed discrimination, obstacles which needed to be overcome included cultural norms, political struggles and the loss of privilege (Berube, 1994; Ravitch, 2000).

Moreover, it became apparent the federal court would not back away from the Brown decision; states in the Deep South used a wide variety of methods to avoid desegregation including legal maneuvers, intimidation and resistance (Ravitch, 2000). Many white Southern leaders fought against integration and improvement of education for blacks, thinking it might give blacks ambitions beyond laboring in the fields. Since blacks held very few state or local offices, they had little say in promoting equal funding between black and white schools (Berube, 1994, Ravitch, 2000).

During the 1960's, American society was shaken by social, cultural, and political changes. In 1960, John F. Kennedy was elected President, promising to make the federal government an active sponsor of social change (Ravitch, 2000). In response to the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* directing the United States Commissioner of Education to study the equity of educational opportunities, the Coleman report, entitled *Equality of Education Opportunity* was commissioned. This report concluded that the social composition of a school's student body was more significant for black achievement than a school's facilities or programs (Ravitch, 2000). For the next decade, the Coleman report advocated racial integration as "…the most consistent mechanism for improving the quality of education for disadvantaged students" (Ravitch, p. 415).

However, Civil Rights leaders often disagreed on what they wanted in schools for black students. After the Brown decision in 1954, the focus seemed to center on 1) desegregation of public schools, 2) community control and Afrocentric curriculum, and 3) affirmative action policies to provide educational access for blacks and other minorities (Oakes & Rogers, 2005, p.

2184). Leaders from Booker T. Washington to Jesse Jackson and those in-between stressed the importance of education (Berube, 1994; Ravitch, 2000). The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., believed schools should be integrated and there was a strong correlation between education and social mobility. When he was told a child's family background was the primary determinant of education success, King (1967) stated, "The job of a school is to teach so well that family background is no longer an issue" (p. 193). While the battle was long and sometimes bloody, large strides in educational integration were made. Did it make a difference? Chief Justice Earl Warren stated, "Does education of children in public schools solely on the basis of race deprive the children of minority groups of equal educational opportunities? We believe it does" (Supreme Court of the United States, 1954, p. 3).

The Excellence Movement

As the equity reform movement began to lose steam, studies in the 1970's showed mounting evidence the amount of change was insignificant (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). While many innovations were adopted on the surface, little had changed in the practice of teaching. Many studies were authorized and conducted on public education showing the importance of school leadership, maximizing learning time, conducting meaningful ongoing staff development, providing an orderly environment and encouraging strong parent involvement (Berube, 1994; Paris, 1995; Ravitch, 2000). The excellence reform movement was ushered to the forefront of education change by the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (Berends, 2004; Berube, 1996; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). This report came about as the answer to many societal problems, and was brought to the forefront due to international politics (Berends, 2004, Berube, 1994).

Rather than address economic or business issues, *A Nation at Risk* placed the blame primarily on the public school system of the United States (Berube, 1996). The report cited

international comparisons, high rates of adult illiteracy, declining scores on college entrance exams, and the rising need for remedial programs in colleges, corporations and the military (Berube, 1994; Vitertti, 2004). *A Nation at Risk* used sensational language in laying the groundwork for gathering support. According to the report,

> Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world . . . The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people . . . If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5).

According to Fullan (2000), there was "…an undeniable conclusion that the educational system and its partners had failed to produce citizens who can contribute to and benefit from a world which offers enormous opportunity and equally complex difficulty of finding your way in it" (p. 7).

Business leaders were convinced educational reform was a means to restore the United States technology superiority and provide a capable work force (Berube, 1994). By 1990, corporate panels had produced over 300 reports on education, most stressing the need for more rigor in the classroom, longer school days or school years, and increased high school graduation requirements. CEO's of businesses regularly testified on federal education legislation (Berends, 2004; Berube, 1996; Ravitch, 2000). Corporate America created an umbrella organization called Business Coalition for Education, representing eleven different business groups including the Business Roundtable, the United States Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of

Manufacturers (Berube, 1994). Larry Cuban, president of the American Educational Research Associates challenged the assumption that school reform would translate into rescuing a faltering economy. "Schools are important" Cuban (1992) argued, "but not critical to economic competitiveness in a global economy" (p. 159). Many educators viewed the role of business increasing and becoming more influential in school reform. Not all approved of this expanding role including Harvard economist Robert B. Reich who "…perceived a 'pattern of neglect' in corporate giving to public education as compared to higher education" (Reich, 1992, p. 26). Many corporations were also at the head of the line seeking tax breaks and subsidies which undermined public education by weakening their tax base (Reich, 1992).

Additional task forces were formed to study education. In 1986, two task forces, the Holmes Group and the Carnegie Forum offered proposals for change in requirements, training, and working conditions for teachers (Paris, 1995). But problems still existed as too many students entered school without a real chance of obtaining a decent education due to poverty, cultural deprivation, family problems, or abuse (Paris, 1995). Many outside of education wondered whether those in education had a willingness to address the depth and breadth of the problem (Ravitch, 2000). *A Nation at Risk,* which was now the landmark of educational literature, cited lax academic standards which could be correlated with lax behavioral standards and discipline. The report did not propose differentiated instruction or sorting students by their likely future occupation (Berube, 1994; Dubour & Eaker, 1998). Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence were viewed as raw materials of international commerce (National Commission on Excellence, 1983). Learning was the indispensable investment required for success in the information age (Ravitch, 2000).

Whether *A Nation at Risk* resulted in successful reforms is debatable. Many in education viewed these reforms as being additional "top-down" attempts to mandate educational improvement which did not consider the expertise of those who were to implement these changes (Berube, 1994; Ravitch, 2000). When President Reagan hosted a ceremony in the East Room of the White House to celebrate the school reforms the report helped to launch, Edward Fiske, former education director of the New York *Times*, said, "Leading politicians and educators, as well as those in the national media who cover education, used the occasion to reflect on the accomplishments of school reform. And we came to a startling conclusion: there weren't any" (Fiske, 1992, p. 24).

The excellence reform movement gained further impetus and support in 1989 when President George Bush convened the nation's governors for a summit meeting on education – only the third time in the nation's history governors had been asked to meet to consider a single topic (Ravitch, 2000). According to Paris (1995):

> The governors, led in part by then Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton developed six national goals for education to be achieved by the year 2000: 1) all children will start school ready to learn, 2) the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent, 3) American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography, 4) Unites States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement, 5) every adult American will be literate, and 6) every school will be free of drugs and violence. (Paris, p. 7)

These voluntary standards described what students should be expected to learn and created a coherent framework of academic expectations. It was anticipated Congress would

create a national board to review and revise national education standards. When President Bush was defeated by Bill Clinton in 1992, there appeared to be bi-partisan agreement on these issues as part of Clinton's campaign had been to establish a system of national standards and tests (Ravitch, 2000). Clinton's first major education legislation, called *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* was enacted in 1994. He hoped this legislation would "…stimulate the development of a voluntary system of skills standards and certification to serve as a cornerstone of the national strategy to enhance workplace skills" (Berube, 1994, p. 107).

To monitor this strategy, Clinton established a National Skills Standards Board, composed of eight representatives each from industry, labor, and education. The bill passed with bipartisan support from the House by a 307-188 vote (Viteritti, 2004). In 1994, Congress created the National Education Standards and Improvement Council to review and endorse state and national standards (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). However, the national standards became a political issue, as critics asserted the standards movement represented a federal takeover of schools and an attempt to indoctrinate students with the liberal agenda (Berube, 1996; Ravitch, 2000). After Clinton convened a second education summit in 1996, the standards movement was transferred from federal to state governments, resulting in a temporary decline in federal influence on education (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The standards movement was revived in 2001 with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind.* This bill resulted in the most sweeping effort by the federal government to move into regulation and influence on public education (Bracey, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Meier, 2004).

No Child Left Behind.

When Congress passed George W. Bush's signature education initiative *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB)*,* it was widely saluted as a bipartisan breakthrough – a victory for American

children, particularly those traditionally underserved by public schools. After the passage of the bill in 2001, civil rights advocates praised NCLB for its emphasis on improved education for students of color, those living in poverty, new English learners, and students with disabilities (Darling-Hammond, 2007). According to Darling-Hammond (2007), "NCLB did have two positive aspects – 1) it shined a spotlight on longstanding inequities and could trigger attention on the needs of students neglected in many schools; and 2) by insisting all students are entitled to quality teachers, the law stimulated recruitment efforts in states where low income and 'minority students have experienced a revolving door of inexperienced, untrained teachers' " (p. 7). According to Giroux and Schmidt (2004) "NCLB did 1) address the needs of disadvantaged children and 2) took steps toward improving accountability" (p. 213). Thus, NCLB continued legislation first passed in the 1960's to improve education services for disadvantaged students primarily at the elementary level.

Questions quickly surfaced after passage of the bill and still remain unanswered about whether or not NCLB is the answer to education reform (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Meier, 2004). Many (Aldridge, 2003; Bracey, 2000) noted the initiative set a number of unrealistic goals without addressing many of the problems or challenges which currently exist as public schools work to meet the needs of their students. Selected writers (Bracey, 2002, Meier, 2004) postulated NCLB proposed to accomplish a statistical improbability of 100% mastery, raised false expectations, gave the illusion tests measure all worthwhile standards, assumed penalties will motivate children and teachers and school cannot do it all without additional financial support. Darling-Hammond (2007) argued "NCLB 1) waters down the curriculum; 2) fosters a 'kill and drill' approach to testing; 3) mistakenly labels successful schools as failing; and 4) harms special education students through inappropriate testing" (p. 3).

According to Bracey (2002), "Assessment is important to get students to reflect on their work and the work of others, not as a test of speed, but rather as a measure of deliberation, critical analysis and dialogue" (p. 223). While individual schools and school districts have some leeway about how to address these challenges, this effort is viewed by a large number of educators as a top-down effort by the federal government to provide mandates they are either unwilling or unable to fund (Bracey, 2002).

At the core of *No Child Left Behind* are a number of measures designed to drive broad gains in student achievement and hold states and school districts more accountable for student progress (Bracey, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2007). By the 2005-06 school year, states were required to begin testing students in grades 3-8 annually in reading and mathematics. By 2007-08, states were required to test students in science at selected grade levels. States were required to test a sample of 4th and 8th grade students in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing program to provide a comparison for state test results. Student success on these tests determines whether schools meet "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004). Title I schools who fail to meet AYP for two consecutive years must be provided technical assistance by the state and its students must be offered a choice of other public schools to attend. Students in schools who fail to make AYP for three consecutive years must be offered supplemental education services, including private tutoring (United States Congress, 2002).

Other less controversial components of *No Child Left Behind* include state and district report cards, teacher qualifications, Reading First grants and funding changes (United States Congress, 2002). The most important of these is teacher qualifications. By the end of the 2005-06 school year, every teacher in core content areas was required to be highly qualified which means a teacher is certified or demonstrates proficiency in his or her subject matter (United

States Congress, 2002). There is not much debate about the correlation between a highly qualified teacher and student learning. The problem lies in finding enough high-quality teachers to staff all public schools, especially schools in areas where quality teachers are difficult to recruit and retain (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Several researchers argued that *No Child Left Behind* fails to address and in some cases exacerbates problems faced by public schools (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Meier, 2004). The act does nothing to address funding inequalities which exist across the country. According to Bracey (2002):

> Emphasis on accountability and testing has nothing to say about poor urban areas and rural students at all, who are taught by inexperienced teachers, attend overcrowded classrooms, lack adequate school supplies, inhabit decrepit buildings and live, in some cases, in districts that spend $39,000 less per pupil than children in richest schools (p. 221).

In some states, high-spending districts outspend low-spending districts by a margin of three to one. School funding lawsuits are currently filed in more than 25 states (Bracey, 2002). The federal government, which has mandated requirements of NCLB, provides less than 10% of budgets for most schools (Aldridge, 2003, Bracey, 2002). Most high-achieving countries fund schools centrally and equally with additional funds for needier schools. The need for highly-qualified teachers will require commitments for additional funding on local, state, and federal levels (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Moreover, *No Child Left Behind* testing tends to narrow the focus of curriculum. The accountability system provides a narrow view of what constitutes teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Due to the emphasis on accountability testing, the amount of research and project work

has declined (Bracey, 2002). States are discouraged from assessment requiring extensive writing and analysis. These changes seem to be moving curriculum in the opposite direction from what the 21st century economy requires (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Many of the punitive measures of NCLB punish the neediest schools and students (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Guthrie & Springer, 2004). The practice of labeling schools as failures makes it harder to attract and retain quality teachers. The requirement for failing schools to use funds to support choice and provide supplemental services results in fewer funds for the normal and everyday operations of the schools. According to Darling-Hammond (2007), the federal government needs to support efforts to improve student achievement by "1) Assisting in the development of world class standards, curriculum, and assessments; 2) developing a student progress or continuous improvement model of assessment, 3) providing support for adequate school resources and facilities; and 4) supporting the development of an adequate supply of high-qualified teachers" (p. 7). Darling-Hammond (2007) further stated:

> For an annual cost of $3 billion, or less than one week in Iraq, the nation could underwrite the high-quality preparation of 40,000 teachers annually – enough to fill all the vacancies taken by unprepared teachers each year; seed 100 top-quality urban-teacher-education programs and improve the capacity of all programs to prepare teachers who can teach diverse learners well; ensure mentors for every new teacher hired each year; and provide incentives to bring expert teachers into high-need schools by improving salaries, and working conditions (p. 5).

Despite the flaws associated with *No Child Left Behind,* the fact remains until the law is modified, changed, or repealed; it remains the law of the land. The reviews that follow outline some the challenges of making changes to meet the demands of NCLB. According to Giroux and

Schmidt (2004), "The increasing of student achievement by reforms such as *No Child Left*

Behind Act has allowed education to become an object of intense political, cultural, and social

scrutiny, and educational reform a top governmental priority" (p. 213).

Schools and Change

As educators and researchers examined the results of the various reform movements, it

became apparent the changes instituted by these movements had not resulted in positive

achievement gains anticipated (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006).

Furthermore the pressures on educators and the public school system have continued to grow.

Moreover, NCLB and its accountability measures have resulted in additional test and

corresponding benchmarks for schools, and has succeeded in challenging schools to take a closer

look at their educational programs and how they do the business of educating students (Darling-

Hammond, 2007; Meier, 2004, United States Congress, 2002).

Many education authors take a dim view of reform movements (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Consequently, Perkins (1992) argued, "A review of the research on school innovation led to the

profoundly discouraging conclusion that almost all educational innovations fail in the long run"

(p. 205). Many people have come to the resulting conclusion that finding alternatives to public

education would be preferable to waiting for additional reform movements. Fullan (1997)

addressed the lack of success in education reform when he wrote, "None of the current strategies

being employed in education reform results in substantive widespread change … The first step

toward liberation, in my view, is the realization that we are facing a lost cause" (p. 220). Some

believe the history of failed reform movements is evidence it is impossible to create a sense of

urgency in school administrators and teachers. Unless they move quickly to transform their

schools in dramatic ways, Schlechty (1997) argued, "Public school will not be a vital component of America's system of education in the twenty-first century" (p. xi).

Why has school reform failed? According to Dufour and Eaker (1998), "Reform movements have failed for four separate reasons – 1) the complexity of the task, 2) misplaced focus, 3) lack of clarity on intended results, and 4) lack of perseverance" (p. 13-14). Change is a long process, and teachers often believe they can outwait the change process until the administration changes, or the next new innovation begins. Schlechty (1997) further argued that nothing has been more destructive to the course of school change than this inability to stay the course. There is some agreement among authors about change – change is difficult, the process takes time, and cannot be rushed. And change in today's society is more difficult than ever (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Kotter, 1996; O'Neill, 2000; Wagner & Kegan, 2006).

A new set of challenges awaits today's educators, more so than thirty, even twenty or ten, years ago (Schmoker, 2006). Societal problems exist that our predecessors did not have to face. The nuclear family educators once knew is much less common than in the past. The number of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds continues to increase, special education enrollments have skyrocketed, and in many areas, large influxes of students with limited English proficiency are growing rapidly (Blankstein, 2004). Proponents of private schools continue to work to secure vouchers, tuition tax credits or block grants to support public schools (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). Pressures exist on school district personnel to provide programs such as sex education, driver's education, drug education, and character education (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). These challenges exist at a time when accountability measures such as *No Child Left Behind* put pressure on school districts, schools, teachers and students to

improve student performance to a point where all students will achieve mastery in selected

subjects by the year 2014 (United States Congress, 2002).

Moreover, those associated with education have been accused of being reluctant to

embrace accountability measures (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The measures introduced by NCLB

represent the first extensive federal foray into district-wide accountability. Previous federal

accountability issues centered on schools with Title I students (United States Congress, 2002).

While individual states have had separate systems of school district accountability, many

educators have attempted to soften the impact by citing increased challenges over which schools

have little or no control (Blankstein, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). Districts often cite an increased

number of students living in poverty, society breakdowns, extraordinary demands, increasing

special education issues and the influx of limited English speaking students among other

challenges as excuses for poor performance of students (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Dufour and

Eaker (1998) noted, "Educators have become increasingly defensive and often either blame the

problems of public education on factors beyond their control or challenge the premise that

problems actually exist" (p. 17).

Barriers to Change.

While the concept of change to improve the educational system may sound promising, it

is not readily embraced by a large percentage of educators (Schmoker, 2006). While most would

agree with the overall concept of enhanced student achievement, getting there can create feelings

of insecurity and fear (Blankstein, 2004). Change often requires educators to make adjustments

in the core of their teaching beliefs. The adjustment can be especially troublesome for educators

who have taught in relative isolation for years and have never been asked to evaluate their

current practice (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). Many

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educators (teachers and administrators) have become complacent over time (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Schmoker, 2006). Public education in many communities is much like a monopoly although some communities are feeling competition due to vouchers, private schools, and tuition tax credits (Bracey, 2002). Compulsory attendance laws assure schools of a captive audience. Teacher tenure provides teachers with nearly lifetime security although some components provide a threat to "lifetime contracts" (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

The landscape of public education has changed and will continue to change. NCLB, even though it is described by many as setting unrealistic goals and expectations and is accused of labeling successful schools as 'failing', has created a new sense of urgency which will force schools to make significant changes in the way they do business (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Kotter, 1996). Educators will no longer be able to hide behind the excuse of students coming to school unprepared or be able to blame societal problems for low performance of students (Blankstein, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). Without significant changes in NCLB, pressure to improve student performance will continue to grow and schools who do not respond to the challenges will have to answer to local patrons as well as to state and federal educational authorities (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2004). Thus the number and scope of change initiatives has continued to grow in public education. While a number of schools have been successful in initiating reform movements which produced increases in student achievement, the vast majority have not (Dufour & Eaker; 1998; O'Neill, 2000; Schmoker, 2006).

When discussions occur about reasons for the lack of success of reform movements, the arguments are numerous and sometimes contradictory (Blankstein, 2004, Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The pace of change may be blamed – either because change has come too fast resulting in the staff being overwhelmed or because the change is deemed too slow resulting in the loss of

enthusiasm (Kotter, 1996). Some cite relying too heavily on strong leadership from the principal while others argue the change initiative failed because of a lack of strong leadership (Darling-Hammond, 1996, Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004). Failure might be attributed to the fact the change was too big and attacked too much, while the lack of success of other initiatives is blamed on the fact the organization needed a more aggressive, comprehensive shake-up (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Failure may be blamed on the fact the initiative is seen as top-down without buy-in from the faculty, while other failures are blamed on lack of support from the administration or central office (Kotter, 1996).

Celebration needs to occur or the initiative loses momentum, but cannot occur too quickly or it could be argued a sense of urgency would have been lost (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Change fails in some districts because teachers and administrators do not welcome change, but other districts lose focus because they heartily embrace every change, careening from one fad to another (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). For change to be successful, a critical level of support must be developed, but change often fails if those in leadership wait too long for overwhelming support ensuring implementation would not occur (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Change, even if managed properly, is complex, formidable, and uncomfortable. Sizer (1996) wrote, "I was aware that it would be hard, but I was not aware of how hard it would be" (p. 1). Educators and board members need to understand change is not easy. There are myths about change – one is that if managed properly, it will proceed smoothly. This myth is an illusion that encourages educators to view problems and conflict as evidence of mistakes or a mismanaged process, rather than as the inevitable by-product of serious reform (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Failure to understand the formidable task of change is what leads those who initiate

change to abandon their efforts at the first sign of trouble. According to Sarson (1995), "The decision to undertake change more often than not is accompanied by a kind of optimism and rosy view of the future that, temporarily at least, obscures the predictable turmoil ahead. But that turmoil cannot be avoided and how well it is coped with separates the boys from the men, the girls from the women. It is . . . rough stuff . . . there are breakthroughs, but also brick walls" (p. vii).

While the number of reasons for the failure of change initiatives are numerous and varied, Blankstein (2004) listed three basic problems: time, resistance and hesitancy (p.44). For example, while school districts are tied to the Carnegie unit and many junior and senior high schools still operate on schedules originally developed far in the past, the need for additional time for planning and collaboration must be found or developed if we want educators to work together to improve instruction (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2006; Schmoker, 2004, Sergiovanni, 2004). Many districts have gone to releasing students early or bringing students late to provide educators' time for collaboration. A bigger problem than time may be resistance by school boards, administrators, teachers, and community to recognize the need for change (Blankstein, 2004; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004). While it is important to spend time developing consensus with the staff, waiting for overwhelming support runs the risk of losing forward momentum. While it is important to work with the staff in learning together and building shared knowledge, leaders must encourage people throughout the organization to examine and articulate their assumptions (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2006). However, according to Fullan (2005), "A profession does not have the autonomy to ignore what is regarded as best practice in the field….Leaders within a profession have every right to expect people to seek and implement the best practices in the field" (p. 42). Educators are often hesitant to change because they are

waiting for the dream person or dream program. Different programs work differently in various schools. The program is important but no more important than the commitment of the staff to make necessary changes to improve instruction (Blankstein, 2004).

Bolman and Deal (1997) wrote about barriers to change using different frames. The human resource frame stresses relationships between people and the organization and barriers include anxiety, uncertainty, and feeling of incompetence and neediness (Bolman & Deal, 1997). The structural frame looks beyond individuals to examine the social context of work, and barriers include loss of clarity and stability, confusion and chaos. Bolman and Deal (1997) noted, "In the political frame, organizational goals, structures, and policies emerge from ongoing processes of bargaining and negotiating among major interacting groups" (p. 164). Barriers include disempowerment and conflict between winners and losers. The symbolic frame highlights the tribal aspect of contemporary organizations, emphasizing symbols, rituals, and celebrations. Barriers in the symbolic frame include loss of meaning and purpose as well clinging to the past (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

Teachers and administrators feel they have a reason to resist change as no one likes feeling anxious or incompetent. The changes in routine practices and procedures undercut people's ability to perform with confidence and success (Schmoker, 2006). Lacking the skills and confidence to implement the new ways, they resist or sabotage, awaiting the return of the good old days. Countless reform initiatives falter and fail because managers neglect to spend time and money developing skills and knowledge (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Cohen & Kotter, 2002; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). This neglect underlies the importance of not rushing change, taking the time to provide training in the skills, procedures, and practices necessary for staff members to successfully implement the change process. According to Bolman and Deal (1997), "Without

support, training, and chances to participate in the change process, people become a powerful anchor, making forward motion impossible" (p. 239). Change also generates division and conflict among competing interest groups, especially between the change agents and those supporting the status quo. Too little attention to this conflict will result in a tug-of-war for those in the middle. This conflict saps energy, stifles initiative, and leads ultimately to catastrophic results (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Successful Change

The initial step in a successful change process is creating a sense of urgency (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). Collins (2001) wrote concerning the need as he "…urged organizations to see that the first difficult step toward improvement is to 'confront the brutal facts' about themselves" (p. 65). While many educators may disagree that the system is failing or argue that change is unnecessary, many outside of education (including parents, legislators, and those in the business community) believe otherwise (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Schmoker, 2006). A rising group of voices is asking those in education to recognize the process of education is broken. With the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) in 2001, the resulting implementation has forced educators to recognize change is inevitable in order to address the accountability issues (Buffum & Hinman, 2006a; Darling-Hammond, 2007). Historically, educators have resisted the many reform movements which have surfaced in education. NCLB has changed the landscape for schools by exerting unprecedented pressure on schools (Bracey, 2002). One of the initial steps to successful change is the development of a vision (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Vision

Vision paints the picture of what we can become. The vision needs to address the challenges of the present and the hopes and values of the future (Bolman & Deal, 1997). It plays a key role in producing useful change by helping to direct, align, and inspire. Without an appropriate vision, the change effort can easily dissolve into a confusing list of time-consuming projects that go nowhere at all (Kotter, 1996). Blankstein (2004) wrote, "It should provide a compelling sense of where the school is headed and, in broad terms, what must be accomplished in the future to fulfill the school's purpose. Every decision made, every program implemented, every policy instituted, and all goals should align with the vision" (p. 77).

Once the vision is developed, it becomes incumbent for it to be communicated. The vision should allow staff members to see the benefits of change and begin to feel the change process can be successful (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, Bertani & Quinn, 2004). A good vision acknowledges that sacrifices will be necessary but makes clear that these sacrifices will yield particular benefits and personal satisfactions far superior to those available without attempting to change (Kotter, 1996). Communication of the vision must be done in both words and actions. Change can be undermined when important individuals act in a manner which is inconsistent with verbal communication. It is important for the leader or leadership team to be able to disseminate the vision which should provide the hopeful image of the future (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Kotter, 1996).

Development and dissemination of the vision sets the tone for the success of the change initiative. The development of the vision needs to represent the views and input from all of the stakeholders. The discussion should be a productive debate with dialogue regarding organizational strategies and goals (Kotter, 1996). In order to get buy-in and support, it is

necessary to develop consensus during this process. The leadership team needs to be patient, not rush the process or try to impose their will. The aim must be to develop a collaborative culture (Buffum & Hinman, 2006a; Fullan, Bertani & Quinn, 2004). Blankstein (2004) wrote, "In a collaborative school culture, teams of highly skilled individuals comprise a teaching staff. Each of these individuals is fully committed to helping students learn by becoming active learners themselves" (p. 130). During the implementation phase of the change process, particular attention needs to be paid to training and follow-up. Employees need to develop a new set of skill processes (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Schmoker, 2006). Failure to pay attention to the development of these skills will result in a lack of confidence of employees in the change initiative. Training and follow-up give confidence to those whose roles will change (Darling-Hammond, 1996, Dufour & Eaker, 1998). According to Bolman and Deal (1997), "It sounds simplistic to point out that investment in change calls for collateral investments in training. Yet countless reform initiatives falter or fail because managers neglect to spend time and money on developing necessary knowledge and skills" (p. 321). People who have built up a set of habits over a number of years cannot be expected to change these habits over a short amount of time with a limited amount of training (Duffy, 2006, Dufour & Eaker, 1998). People must be taught technical skills as well as a new set of social skills or attitudes. Even with proper training in the beginning, they must also be provided with follow-up training to help them with problems they encounter (Kotter, 1996).

Leadership

Leadership is an important concept in our society today especially regarding school improvement. Why is leadership important? According to Ogawa and Bossert (1995), "It (leadership) is important, most would agree. We expect it of elected officials, look for it in

outstanding students and athletes, and admire those who have it" (p. 224). Leadership impacts

the performance of any organization, especially those organizations that have made the decision

to pursue change initiatives (Collins, 2001, Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). Traditionally, the role of

the leader has been that of a bold action-oriented figure who solves problems and is able to use

his personality to recruit others (Collins, 2001). Although there may still be some call for this

type of leadership in today's society, most research calls for a more participative approach to

leadership (Blankstein, 2004). The highest form of leadership, according to Collins (2001), is a

"Level Five" leader. In addition to being able to create a compelling vision and galvanize people

to implement it, the Level Five leader has intense professional will and deep humility.

In a slow-moving world, all an organization might need is a good executive in charge. In

an environment of constant change, individuals won't have enough time or expertise to absorb

rapidly shifting competitor, customer and technology information (Kotter, 1996). Organizations

which have successfully implemented change initiatives make valuable use of leadership teams,

form guiding coalitions, establish credibility with individuals, and provide encouragement to

individuals to work as a team (Fullan, 2006, Ogawa & Bossert 1995).

As educators continue to move through the twenty-first century, an individual needs to

know more about leadership than did his counterpart in the past. The assumptions about

leadership have changed from the traditional model, where leadership was thought a divine gift

granted to a small number of people (Kotter, 1996; Lambert, 2006). The traditional model was

slow to recognize the power of the potential of lifelong learning. Lifelong learners have high

standards, ambitious goals, and a real sense of mission in their lives (Wagner & Kegan, 2006).

According to Kotter (1996), "Mental habits which support lifelong learning include "risk-taking,

humble self-reflection, solicitation of opinions, careful listening, and openness to new ideas" (p.

183). In order to encourage lifelong learning, those at the top of enterprises must encourage risk-taking, help employees overcome natural fears, and expand the leadership capacity of their organizations. Leaders must encourage their people to grow, become more comfortable with change and develop leadership skills (Kotter, 1996).Consequently, according to many education scholars, the most promising movement to improve the quality of our educational system is the development of Professional Learning Communities (Blankstein, 2004; Buffum & Hinman, 2006a; Dufour & Eaker, 1998, Schmoker, 2006)

Professional Learning Communities

The number of failed educational reform movements indicates the need for a different type of initiative (Blankstein, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). There are calls from many education researchers and scholars to discard approaches known as strategic planning, systematic reform, and whole-school reform, all of which have failed to provide meaningful changes necessary to meet the ever-increasing demands placed on public schools (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). While success of reform movements has been minimal, there seems to be growing support for use of Professional Learning Communities as a vehicle to provide schools with the best chance to initiate change (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2006; Joyce, 2004). According to Darling-Hammond (1996), "The Commission recommends that schools be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers: organizations that respect learning, honor teaching, and teach for understanding" (p. 198).

Different components of Professional Learning Communities have been associated with other reform movements such as team-teaching, the middle school movement, and *The Coalition of Essential Schools* (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The team-teaching movement had parallels with our current situation in education today as it was fueled by experts and advocates developing sets

of structures and procedures and trying to disseminate them (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Many of those associated with school renewal were involved in the team-teaching movement. Team-teaching collided with the norms and structures of the workplace, failing to win-over the teachers' culture, causing the movement to fade away (Joyce, 2004).

The middle school movement was widely lauded as a replacement for junior high schools and many districts provided funds for regular times for teachers to meet and study (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Although the time was provided for teachers, many staff members lacked the tools to engage in small-group collaboration. Without the training and the follow-up support, collaboration became another time to discuss school business and curriculum, and little to improve the level of instruction (Darling-Hammond, 2007). *The Coalition of Essential Schools*, with membership of over 1,000 schools, developed a clear set of procedures and characteristics of improving schools and a good level of training for leadership teams (Schmoker, 2006). However, many faculties became divided, sometimes against teacher leaders. The initiative failed partly because it failed to address the importance of legitimizing the leadership team (Joyce, 2004).

The overriding characteristics of Professional Learning Communities include questions which must be answered by schools who truly embrace this initiative – including what students need to learn, how we measure their learning, and how do we address students who have not learned (Buffum & Hinman, 2006a, Dufour & Eaker, 1998, Schmoker, 2006). Perhaps the most critical component of Professional Learning Communities is decisions about what we do with students who have difficulty learning. In the past, educators have wanted responsibility to teach and expected students to be responsible for learning (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The challenge is to get the entire school community to raise the level of expectations for all students and, more

importantly, make necessary changes to achieve student success. High-performing schools realize that what they do matters to the learning of each of their students and all children can indeed perform at high levels (Blankstein, 2004).

Once schools embrace learning for all as the fundamental purpose of the school, they begin to recognize some students will require additional time and support to be successful (Blankstein, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). They concentrate on developing a process where students get support during the school day in a timely and systematic basis. Ensuring achievement for all students means having an all-encompassing strategy for the majority of learners (Blankstein, 2004; Buffum & Hinman, 2006a). According to Blankstein (2004), "Essential parts of a plan for student success include: 1) an improvement plan for all students, 2) a system for quickly identifying those in need, 3) a continuum of support and targeted strategies for low achievers, and 4) published reports on closing the achievement gap" (p. 110). This intervention plan is an essential part of Professional Learning Communities, but its development and implementation is dependent upon the commitment of the staff to take responsibility for student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Dufour & Eaker 1998).

The process of individual school reform most often begins with discussions of mission, vision, and values. The difference between a learning community and an ordinary school is the collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Kotter, 1996). This commitment must be made not only by those in the leadership positions, but must be embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). A mission statement should be created and published as a means of giving those involved a clear understanding of their purpose of existence (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The Center on Restructuring of Schools conducted a comprehensive

study on school reform (Newman & Wehlage, 1995). The significant findings of this study were that most successful schools function as "…learning communities in which teachers pursue a clear shared purpose for all students' learning, engage in collaborative activity to achieve that purpose, and take collective responsibility for student learning" (Newman & Wehlage, p. 30).

Vision refers to a picture of the future and instills an organization with a sense of direction. It presents a realistic, credible, and attractive future for the organization – perhaps more desirable than existing conditions (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 1997). A good vision serves three important purposes. First, it clarifies the general direction of change. Second, it motivates people to take action, and third, it helps coordinate the actions of different people (Kotter, 1996, p. 68-69). The lack of a compelling vision remains a major obstacle in any effort to improve schools. The process used to develop a vision statement must foster the support and endorsement of the staff if it is going to be an effective instrument for change (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004). Effective vision statements motivate and energize people, thus creating an organization focused on the future, and give direction to people within the organization (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Many advocates of Professional Learning Communities espouse the process of collaboration as the cornerstone of the movement (Buffum & Hinman, 2006a; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). It is the foundation of the paradigm shift necessary for schools to proceed with this initiative. Teachers begin to meet in core teams to determine which standards are given priority as well as developing common assessments to check for understanding of the key standards (Buffman & Hinman, 2006a). Collaborating on student learning revives the fundamental process of our profession. Rather than acting as independent contractors, teachers serve on collaborative teams who share lessons and best practice (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Despite the abundance of evidence regarding the benefits of collaborative cultures and virtual absence of evidence to the contrary, it is the norm of public school teachers to work in isolation with individual teachers teaching discrete groups of students (Blankstein, 2004). In addressing this common practice, Darling-Hammond (1995) argued, "Separated by their classrooms and packed teaching schedules, teachers rarely work together about teaching practices" (p. 172).

Virtually all school reforms call for increased opportunities for teacher collaboration. According to Dufour and Eaker (1998), "Collaboration is the 'single most important factor' for successful school improvement initiatives and the 'first order of business' for those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their schools" (p. 117). The entire work of Professional Learning Communities is a collective endeavor including observing and reacting as teachers work together to implement the new programs, effectively develop shared attitudes and beliefs, develop high levels of trust, and have the authority to make important decisions (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, Schmoker, 2006). They are charged with developing clear operational norms and have on-going discussions regarding the functioning of the team (Blankstein, 2004). There are a number of ways the team concept can be implemented in schools to promote collaboration including teams based on grade level or subject matter, shared-student teams, acting on school-wide task forces, or working together by areas of professional development (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

As with any educational change initiative, the role of the teacher is paramount to the success of the program. To a teacher who has worked for years in isolation, certain components of Professional Learning Communities (especially collaboration) tend to raise their anxiety levels (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Dealing with the anxiety as well as concerns and fears goes a long way in helping to overcome resistance. According to Schmoker (2004), "Effective teachers must see themselves not as passive, dependent implementers of someone else's script, but as active

members of research teams – as 'scientists who continuously develop their intellectual and investigative effectiveness'" (p. 427). Despite the critical importance of teachers to the effectiveness of a school, they have typically been regarded as functionaries rather than professionals (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). Existing practices for teaching stand in sharp contrast to other professions. Accreditation varies for various teacher education programs throughout the country; over 10% of new hires enter the classroom without formal training and another 14% arrive without fully meeting standards (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

While the framework of professional teaching needs improvement in areas of accreditation, licensing, and certification, districts still must address the qualifications of those teachers they have on staff (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Teachers must make a commitment to shared vision, mission, and goals, and they must focus on results and work on collaborative teams. There are also crucial issues they must address in the classroom (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). They must emphasize learning rather than teaching while emphasizing student engagement with significant content. They must focus on student performance and production and routinely collaborate with colleagues on a wide range of issues (Blankstein, 2004; Buffum & Hinman, 2006a). Professional teachers are students of teaching and consumers of research and must be willing to step forward to function as leaders (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Leadership and Professional Learning Communities

The importance of effective leadership in any change process is well established. It would be difficult to imagine successfully implementing and sustaining a school change process through inevitable setbacks without leadership from a strong principal (Dufour, 2007; Fullan, 2005). However, the role of the principal has changed during the evolution of school to Professional Learning Communities – away from the autocratic leader whose job is to identify

the best way to do things and then monitor the implementation to a person who must create a professional learning community in which teachers can collaborate and learn how to become more effective (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). They must engage the faculty in the creation of a vision and shared values, facilitate consensus building, and encourage conflict resolution (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2006).

Principals of Professional Learning Communities must make conscious efforts to promote wide-spread participation in the decision-making process of their schools. They need to understand they cannot do it alone (Fullan, 2006; Handy, 1995). They must realize the initiative will fail if staff members do not feel ownership in the decisions of the school (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Principals must provide staff members with relevant background information and research findings to help them arrive at informed opinions. They must ensure teachers receive the proper training, which will help them reach the goals of the school (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

Much is required of school leaders if they are to build the capacity of people throughout the organization to help more students learn at higher levels (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). They must build continuous improvement processes into the routine practices of the school. It is essential they reinforce the idea that learning, not teaching, needs to be the focus of decisions made by the staff (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Educators ask for different things from leaders than were expected in past reform movements. Leadership of Professional Learning Communities, while different from the autocratic leadership demanded in the past, may be even more essential (Dufour, 2007).

Leadership Capacity

If an organization is to be successful, the concept of leadership must be broad-based, and not confined to one single person (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001; Fullan, 2005; Lambert, 1998; Lambert 2003). The definitions of leadership have changed from what they have been in the past.

Schools no longer look only to building administrators for leadership (Blankstein, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998) According to Lambert (1998), "Leadership is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively" (p. 5). The mark of a successful leader may not be based on their individual impact on student learning, but the number of good leaders they leave behind (Fullan, 2005; Katz & Earl, 2006). Leadership must be broad-based and include all stakeholders – teachers, classified staff, administrators, parents, community members, and students (Lambert 2003). Those in what are commonly viewed as leadership roles (building and district administrators) must abandon their view of leadership as a historical one steeped in power and authority (Fullan, 2005; Lambert, 2006).

According to Lambert (2003), "Leadership capacity can refer to an organization's capacity to lead itself and to sustain that effort when key individuals leave" (p. 4). The development of leadership capacity is essential to the transformation of our educational system (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001; Katz & Earl, 2006). Features which are prerequisites for high leadership capacity schools include a shared vision, inquiry-based use of data, reflective practice, collaboration, and collective responsibility for student achievement (Newman & Wehlage, 1995). The move to develop leadership capacity calls for movement away from rigidly defined roles. In order to achieve this movement, it is essential for teachers to be willing to accept leadership roles, for schools to move away from the employment and support of autocratic administrators, and for districts to provide opportunities for teachers to develop their leadership skills (Lambert, 2003). It is incumbent for schools to develop leadership skills among staff members. According to Fullan (2005), "Capacity building consists of developments that increase the collective power in the school in terms of new knowledge and competencies, increased motivation to engage in improvement actions, and additional resources (p. 175).

This learning needs to continue, not only through workshops, but through daily interactions in cultures designed for job-embedded learning and coordination (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004). The learning will continue only if the school or district has a collegial culture, shared vision, and collective responsibility for student learning (Lambert, 2003). A collaborative environment fosters teacher learning and leadership. Cozemius and O'Neill (2001) wrote,

> People in collaborative environments feel appreciated, valued, and respected; the system brings out the best in them. There is a shared sense of mission and goals; those who are engaged in the organization are there because they choose to be, because they find the school's mission and goals personally compelling, and because they see their own values reflected in those of the organization (p. 67).

District Leadership

The role of district administration is important to the development of Professional Learning Communities (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2002; Schmoker, 2006). District leaders must accept responsibility for creating conditions which foster the development of learning communities in schools (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2002). The district leadership must take the lead in developing resources to improve student achievement. Leaving the issue of school improvement to each individual school to resolve on its own does not result in more effective schools (Elmore, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Schlechty, 2005). District leaders must work diligently to develop a clear understanding of the need for change. By taking a look at the data, the district leaders can began to develop a sense of urgency within the staff (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008; Schlechty, 2005, Schmoker, 2006). The beliefs in a new system must be presented in a way which compels stakeholders to support the required changes (Schlechty, 2005). Building the capacity for change begins when the board and district administrators demonstrate support by

reading research, attending conferences, visiting similar schools, engaging in ongoing dialogue and empowering the staff (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2002; Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008).

Furthermore, the district administration must be active in working with building administrators in improving instruction. The superintendent must focus district efforts on team based instructional improvement (Schlechty, 2002). Team meetings should be focused on the improvement of instruction, and successful teams should be encouraged to share results (Schmoker, 2006). Those assigned to supervise curriculum and instruction must work to develop common curriculum and common assessments as well as procedures to formally analyze achievement data. District leaders should schedule time for teams to meet and annually review performance data (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2002; Schlechty, 2002, Schmoker, 2006). According to Meier (2002), "If we truly wish to multiply the number of successful schools across the land, then we must replace current practices with concrete, common sense actions at the district office. Leaders at these levels must work as teams. Schlechty (2002) summed up the importance of the superintendent in school improvement when he wrote, "Yet it remains the fact that it is the relationship between the superintendent and building principals, more than any other factor, that explains the ability of school districts to ensure that change efforts are sustained beyond the tenure of the initiating principal and that whatever positive effects there are become distributed throughout the system" (p. 67).

In order for a change initiative to be successful, district leaders must limit other initiatives. According to Elmore (2003), "Most districts are engaged in a frenetic amount of unconnected activities and initiatives characterized by volatility and superficiality" (p. 109). District leaders often act as if they believe the more initiatives they are involved in, the more successful they will be. According to Pfieffer and Sutton (2000), "Leaders who push for fewer

changes, and push for them harder are more likely to have success than leaders who introduce so many changes that people become confused about which matter most and least" (p. 174). District leaders must communicate priorities effectively, consistently, and with one voice and not allow people throughout the organization to opt out of practices which are more effective than current practices (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2002; Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008; Schmoker, 2006). The most important role of the district administration may be to speak with one voice with the central office and with other administrators. According to Patterson and others (2008), "We concur that 'solidarity' among leaders at all levels is one of the 'most important forms of social capital' and a key element in bringing about change" (p. 189).

Summary

This review of the literature revealed a long history of attempts to reform public education. The progressive era of reform began in the late 1800's with vigorous debate about the purpose of our educational system. Questions arose about whether the purpose of education was to prepare students for college or to provide a liberal education for the benefit of all students. Arguments also centered on the need for tracking versus educating students of different ability levels together.

The second major attempt to improve education was the Equity Reform Movement. This movement began with *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* court case and focused on providing education for all students. The *Brown* decision struck down the idea of "separate but equal" and attempted to force school districts to integrate all public schools. During this era, the prevailing idea was education should be used as a means for those in poverty to make a better life for themselves.

Additionally, the report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled *A Nation at Risk* was the impetus behind the beginning of the Excellence Movement. This report blamed education for a sluggish United States economy, citing international comparisons showing students in this country underperforming those in other countries. While many argued school reform would not rescue a failing economy, the ever-growing influence of business leaders pressured the federal government to force "top-down" change on the educational system. The second major wave of the Excellence Movement occurred with the passage of *No Child Left Behind*, which when implemented pressured schools to raise test scores of all students or risk monetary and accreditation sanctions. It set what many educators viewed as unrealistic goals – 100% proficiency by the year 2014 for all students. While the law had positive effects such as creating a renewed sense of urgency for school reform and emphasizing improved test scores for all students regardless of race or socioeconomic status, it emphasized penalties without providing much-needed assistance to lower performing schools.

While these movements achieved limited and mixed success, educational researchers have shown a new reform strategy which offers schools the best chance for on-going, lasting improvement. Many education leaders are promoting Professional Learning Communities (PLC) as a way to improve the system. PLC challenges all school personnel to take personal responsibility for the learning of all students. The key to the success of the PLC may be for teachers to make adjustments to their teaching when students do not learn, searching to find ways to make all students successful.

Discussed in Chapter Three is a description of the research design and methodology. The design, a qualitative study, is described. Data collection and instrumentation are explained, along with the resulting methods of data analysis. Provided within Chapter Four are the presentation

and analysis of data. Findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research will be

presented in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

With the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2001, the federal government has increased its presence and influence on public school education. The legislation not only challenged districts to offer a better education for their students, but provided for sweeping sanctions for unsuccessful schools including tutoring, school choice, revamped curriculum, and removal of ineffective teachers and administrators (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Meier, 2004). Repeated failures could result in districts being taken over by outside government agencies.

Studies of educational reform history have shown limited success of many reform movements. The Progressive Movement of the 1890s and the early 1900s concentrated the debate on the purpose of education. The Equity Reform Movement beginning in the 1950s created increased opportunities for minorities. The Excellence Movement, ushered in by the 1983 report entitled *A Nation at Risk* and strengthened by the *No Child Left Behind Act,* have blamed many societal woes on the failure of public schools.

In the aftermath of many failed reform movements and educational innovations, education authors and researchers have promoted the development and implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in order to address the challenges faced by the educational system. While there are many components of successful PLC, the leadership of building and district administrators could be essential to their successful implementation. Furthermore, little research has been conducted on the role of the district administrators in the implementation of PLC.

In Chapter Three, the rationale for the study's design and methodology are described. The rationale for the qualitative case study is given, as well as the population and sampling for the study depicted. A description of the instrumentation used along with data collection methods and data analysis is explained in detail to assist in the replication of the study. Completing the information presented in the chapter is a discussion of the researcher's biases and assumptions impacting the study.

Problem and Purpose Overview

Accountability issues continue to remain front and center of education concerns. With the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001, pressures for schools to improve grew dramatically. The NCLB Act instituted a number of punitive sanctions to address underperforming schools (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Meier, 2004).

While more research is necessary, Professional Learning Communities (PLC) are viewed by many educational researchers and authors as the most promising way to improve education quality (Blankstein, 2004; Buffum & Hinman, 2006a; Schmoker, 2006). While much has been written about the importance of school building leadership in the process, little research addressed the role of the district administration. The purpose of this study was to seek to understand the importance and significance of the of the district administration's role in the development and operation of Professional Learning Communities.

Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to examine the changes which occurred in schools as a result of the implementation of Professional Learning Communities. The synthesis of the literature revealed many education authors and researchers recognize the single best hope for significant school improvement is strategies commonly associated with Professional Learning

Communities. The study also looked at the role the district administration played in the

implementation of Professional Learning Communities and the strategies used in this support.

The resulting research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What role did the district administration play in the development of the individual

   schools as a Professional Learning Community?

2. What initial and continued strategies were used by the district administration to

   support the transition of individual schools from traditional teaching environments to

   Professional Learning Communities?

3. How was the readiness for change assessed by district administration?

4. What outcomes have occurred due to the implementation of Professional Learning

   Communities?

5. Has the establishment of Professional Learning Communities had an impact on the

   behaviors and attitudes of the certified staff?

Rationale for Using Qualitative Research

According to Merriam (1998), "Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering

several forms of inquiry that helps us to understand and explain the meaning of social

phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (p. 3). In contrast to

quantitative methodology, the qualitative approaches seek to capture what a program experience

means to participants through interviews and observations (Patton, 1997). Characteristics of

qualitative case study are: (a) the research is the primary instrument for data collection and

analysis; (b) qualitative research usually involved the researcher meeting and visiting with

participants in the study; (c) qualitative research builds on hypotheses or theories rather than

existing theory; (d) qualitative research focuses on process, meaning and understanding to

produce a rich descriptive study; and (e) qualitative research is fundamentally interpreted by the researcher (Creswell 1998 & 2003; Merriam, 1998).

A different use of evaluation enhancing mutual understanding involves designing the evaluation to "give voice" to the participants (Creswell, 2003, p. 10; Patton, 1997, p. 93). The emphasis on the "voice" of the participants is important because it provides actual experiences, beliefs, and values, and becomes a united voice for reform and change (Creswell, 2003, p. 10). Case study design offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand a reader's experience (Merriam, 1998). This researcher chose a qualitative approach to research in order to capture the tenor of the perceptions of the stakeholders involved in Professional Learning Communities.

There is no standard form for reporting qualitative research. The researchers use methods of observations, interviews, and focus groups. The goals for this in-depth approach is for the researcher to be able to describe, explain, compare, and understand the meaning of social phenomena (Merriam, 1998). The researcher chose a case study to answer the questions of the consequence of central office leadership in the establishment of schools as Professional Learning Communities. A secondary question is the types of changes in the attitudes and beliefs of the staff as schools change from traditional school methodology to PLC. As the PLC movement continues to grow, questions will continue as to the role of leadership by the district office during this process.

There are limitations, however, of case study methodology (Merriam, 1998). Although emphasis is placed on rich, thick description, data collection and analysis, time is of the essence to the researcher. Because of the use of participants in the qualitative case study, all research is filtered through the participant's values and perspectives. In this study the primary task of the researcher was to seek the insights and perceptions of others about the process of schools moving

toward Professional Learning Communities. To address these limitations, the researcher used multiple methods of data collection such as focus groups, interviews of administrators, and interviews of board members in order to assure validity and reliability of the data (Creswell, 2003) and to triangulate the data. In addition, member-checking was used to review data and information provided by the participants to assure validity of the qualitative findings (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). Therefore, this qualitative case study remained sufficiently open and flexible to permit the study of district leadership to continue to emerge as data were gathered for further research (Patton, 1997).

Population and Sample

The impact of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and the role of the district administration were important topics in terms of increasing and sustaining student achievement. Therefore, the larger populations to whom the results of this study could be transferred to included public school districts seeking to implement PLC as a way to improve student achievement.

The researcher chose a qualitative case study design to achieve an understanding of the role of the central office administration in the development of successful Professional Learning Communities. The sampling plan was two-phased. The first phase which was purposeful in selection involved identifying schools where Professional Learning Communities had been successfully implemented. According to Creswell (2003), "The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" (p. 185). This procedure allows the researcher to select a sample he believes will provide the data he needs (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). The researcher contacted a representative from each of Missouri's nine Regional Professional Development Centers

(RPDC), and asked each of them to identify two school districts where Professional Learning

Communities had been successfully implemented. Criteria for this identification included

districts which had district-wide implementation, had been implementing PLC for a minimum of

three years, and were actively engaged in professional development to support and sustain PLC.

For the purposes of the study, it was essential for the superintendent to have been in the district

during the initial stages of the PLC process. Secondly, the schools were numbered and a

randomizer used to select three school districts from the eighteen identified. According to experts

(Creswell, 2003; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003), this random, purposeful sample of schools was

appropriate because of the RPDC previous knowledge about area schools and the fact that these

schools provided a representative sample of schools engaged in the PLC process. The districts

selected were considered representative of the state from which they were selected because

geographically the nine RPDC areas from which the eighteen schools were selected represent a

cross section of all the districts in the state.

For school districts identified as the purposeful sample of the study, the administration

permission for school participation letter (see Appendix A) was sent to the Superintendent of

Schools requesting permission for the staff of the school district to participate in the study. After

receiving informed consent from the superintendent, the superintendent was asked to identify

members of the building PLC teams throughout the district for the purpose of randomly selecting

participants for the focus groups. In addition, the superintendent was asked to identify a board

member who was on the board during the initial stages of the PLC and was knowledgeable of the

process.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Three ethical guidelines were followed to protect the human subjects of the research involved in this study. Protection of participants from harm, assurance of the confidentiality and security of research data, and avoidance of deceiving subjects involved in the research were addressed (Creswell, 2003; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Superintendents of all participating school districts received and signed consent forms, granting permission for the district's participation in the study. Elements of the consent form include the following: the right to participate voluntarily, the purpose of the study, the procedures of the study, the right to ask questions and obtain the results of the study and have their privacy respected, the benefits of the study for the individual, and the signatures of the participants and the researcher (Creswell, 2003). These consent forms met with the approval of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Missouri, Columbia (see Appendix A). No research was conducted without signed letters of informed consent. All responses were coded to assure confidentiality of subjects was protected.

After obtaining permission from superintendents and selecting the participants, an e-mail was sent to all participants informing them of the study (see Appendix A). All participants were asked to sign the informed consent if they agreed to participate. The researcher then contacted the superintendents, board member, and focus group members to schedule interview times and locations. A letter of confirmation (see Appendix A), the interview questions (see Appendix B), and a letter of informed consent (see Appendix A) were e-mailed to each interview participant to confirm the date and time of the interview and to provide time for the participants to review and reflect on the questions.

Data were collected from November 2008 through February, 2009. This included structured face-to-face interviews with superintendents, building administrators, and board of education members of selected schools. Focus group interviews were conducted with building leadership teams of each school district. Each of these methods allowed for participants to use their own voice.

Interview protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted consisting of open-ended questions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) relating to the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities (PLC), the role of district administrators in the development of PLC, and the impact of the establishment of PLC on the certified staff. The superintendent and one board member from the three different school districts were selected to participate in the interviews (n= 6). The selection of the board member was purposeful based on membership during the initial stages of PLC and knowledge of the process. These participants were selected based on being determined as information-rich participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000) due to their active participation in the governance structures of the PLC. The interviews lasted one hour or less and were conducted on the school site.

Each interview was audio-taped and later transcribed by the researcher. Member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and confirm for each participant that their stories were portrayed as intended (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Participants were instructed to contact the researcher to make necessary corrections. Changes were made to comply with the requirements outlined in the letter of informed consent. Field notes were taken by the researcher during the interview process to record information not reflected in the audio-

tapes. Triangulation of the data occurred through the use of thick, rich descriptions provided

from the interviews (Creswell, 2003; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Merriam, 1998).

Focus Group Protocol

The members of the PLC leadership teams from each the schools in each district were

obtained. From this list, a random selection of 5 to 7 participants was made to choose the

participants of the focus group for the district. This resulted in three focus groups for this inquiry,

one from each school district. The focus group protocol (see Appendix B) was selected because,

as noted by Krueger and Casey (2000), "An understanding of differences in perspectives

between groups" (p. 24) was necessary. Furthermore, focus groups are used when "the purpose is

to uncover factors that influence opinions, behavior or motivation" (Krueger & Casey, p. 24).

The focus groups' conversations were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher at a later

date. The focus groups took place at the various school settings lasting less than one hour for

each group. The facilitator used slightly modified questions based on the same questions used in

the interview protocol for the superintendents and board members.

Observation Protocol

Observations were also used for participants engaged in PLC activities in their school

settings, including both verbal and nonverbal communication (Merriam, 1998). Like interviews,

observations are an important tool utilized in qualitative research (Merriam). Unlike interviews,

observations allow the researcher to examine an actual view of the phenomenon being studied in

its natural setting. The researcher assumed the role of participant observer during these

observations. As Merriam (1998) noted, "The researcher's observer activities which are known

to the group, are subordinate to the researcher's role as participant. The trade-off here is between

the depth of the information revealed to the researcher and the level of confidentiality promised

to the group in order to obtain this information" (p.101). Additionally the researcher engaged in taking field notes (see Appendix B) during the observations. The observations included ideas of "verbal descriptions of the setting, the people, and activities; direct quotations and observer's comments" (Merriam, 1998, p.106).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data collection and analysis must be a simultaneous process (Merriam, 1998). Stake (1995) asserted that data analysis begins at no particular moment. The researcher gathered and analyzed data concurrently. The causal comparative method was utilized for further data analysis (Merriam, 1998). Systematic coding of data permitted the emergence of categories or themes. As themes emerged, a refinement process occurred whereby the researcher identified thematic relationships and underlying theoretic implications. The researcher ended the official data collection process upon noticing duplication and repeats of data.

In order to triangulate the data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, as well as focus groups and observations. The interviews were used in conjunction with focus group data and observations in order to gain a greater understanding of the phenomena being studied. In order to maintain consistency, the researcher was the only interviewer and facilitator of the focus groups in this study. Each of the participants was audio-recorded, then transcribed verbatim. Then the individuals were allowed to check their transcript for accuracy. The individual review of the transcripts, field observations, logs, notes, and patterns of responses emerged by coding categories that allowed the researcher to look for consistency and triangulation (Creswell, 2003).

Research Biases and Assumptions

As in any research, validity, reliability, and ethics are major concerns. Merriam (1998) supports the enhancement of consistency by thorough use of multiple sources of evidence in order to enhance reliability. The research must (a) explain theory and assumptions underlying the study; (b) triangulate the data; and (c) create an audit trail (Merriam, 1998, pp. 206-207). Merriam (1998) further supported the enhancement of consistency by thorough use of triangulation, verification, and identification or researcher biases and assumptions. Credibility of this study was enhanced through the use of multiple evidentiary sources which permitted the process of triangulation. Participants reviewed retrieved data for accuracy of their responses (member checking).

One underlying assumption made by this researcher was the belief that Professional Learning Communities have made a positive impact on improvement of student performance. The experience of the researcher in the implementation of PLC has resulted in improved student performance. This experience may impact the researcher's bias regarding the effectiveness of PLC on student performance; however, the design controls that have been established minimized the impact of this bias. A second assumption held by the researcher was the belief that district administration has a positive impact on the success of PLC. However, the experience of the researcher as a district administrator will strengthen the interpretation of the data based on the understanding of the nuances of the position.

Summary

Provided in this chapter was the rationale for a description of a case study used to investigate the impact of district administration efforts to assist the successful implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Information was presented related to the design and

methodology used to carry out this investigation. The population and sample were described, along with the researcher's biases and assumptions. Data analysis and research are presented in Chapter Four. Information in Chapter Five concludes with a discussion of the research findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine the changes which occurred in schools as a result of the implementation of Professional Learning Communities. The synthesis of the literature revealed many education authors and researchers recognize the single best hope for significant school improvement is strategies commonly associated with Professional Learning Communities. The study also looked at the role the district administration played in the implementation of Professional Learning Communities and the strategies used in this support.

As part of this study, interviews were conducted of central office administrators and board members. The researcher also conducted focus group interviews with randomly selected members of building leadership teams. Using field notes and observations the researcher analyzed and compared the information received during the interviews. Also used as additional data sets for this study were surveys, evaluation plans, minutes and agendas of meetings, and collaboration work products.

Organization of Data Analysis

Part 1: Demographic Data

School Districts

The three school districts selected for this study were public school districts from three different parts of Missouri: Suburban Kansas City, Central Missouri, and Southwest Missouri. These three districts were randomly selected from a list of districts submitted by area Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDC) as districts who had successfully implemented Professional Learning Communities district-wide.

District A is a rapidly growing suburban district which does not contain a lot of industry. A majority of the residents in the districts commute to the Kansas City area for employment. The district had 4,886 students in 2004, and has grown to a total of 5,789 students in 2008. The student demographics show enrollment which is 1.1% Asian, 9.0% Black, 2.8% Hispanic, .2% Indian, and 86.9% White. The percentage of free and reduced students is 20.6%. Graduates of this school district commit to the following after graduation – 73.8% attend college, 3.7% attend post secondary non college, 16.9% are employed and 2.8% enter the military.

Average household income for those living in district A is $68,444 while the average teacher salary is $42,126 and the mean average administrator salary is $82,247. Teachers in the district have an average of 10 years teaching experience with 98.1% considered highly qualified. Funding for the district is obtained from the following sources – Local 56.9%, State 39.2% and Federal 3.9% resulting in the average expenditures per pupil of $8,127.

District B is a stable district which is heavily reliant on the tourist industry. The enrollment, while fluctuating some during the last five years, remains constant overall, with 2,106 students during 2004, and 2,116 students in 2008. The student demographics show enrollment as consisting of .8% Asian, .9% Black, 2.4% Hispanic, .8% Indian, and 95.2% White, with a percentage of free and reduced students at 52.1%. Graduates of this school district commit to the following after graduation – 52.0% attend college, 3.9% attend post secondary non college, 36.2% are employed and 4.7% enter the military.

Average household income for those living in district B is $47,389 while the average teacher salary is $36,751 and the average administrator salary is $68,956. Teachers in the district have an average of 12.0 years teaching experience with 99.8% identified as highly qualified

teachers. Funding for the district is obtained from the following sources – Local 70.0%, State 22.0%, and Federal 7.9% resulting in an average expenditure per pupil of $7,759.

District C is a district which in the past had been reliant on a number of industries which have left the area. Because of that, the current administration expects a steadily declining trend in student enrollment. In 2004, the district had 2,433 students and has 2,361 students during 2008. The student demographics show enrollment as consisting of .7% Asian, 11.2% Black, 2.9% Hispanic, .2% Indian, and 85.0% White with a percentage of free and reduced students at 49.1%. Graduates of this school district commit to the following after graduation – 64.9% attend college, 4.6% attend post secondary non college, 26.0% are employed, and 3.3% enter the military.

Average household income for those living in the district is $42,805 with the average teacher salary at $35,052 and the average administrator salary at $65,317. Teachers in the district have an average of 12.7 years teaching experience with 94.8% identified as highly qualified teachers. Funding for the district is obtained from the following sources – Local 51.8%, State 38.0% and Federal 10.2% resulting in an average expenditure per pupil of $7,457.

For comparison purposes, the State of Missouri has a slightly declining student population. Missouri student demographics show state wide enrollment which is 1.8% Asian, 18.0% Black, 3.6% Hispanic, .4% Indian, and 76.2% White with a percentage of free and reduced students at 42.1%. The average teacher salary in Missouri is $43,236 and the average administrator salary is $80,208. The average number of years of experience in Missouri is 12.4 with 96.4% considered highly qualified. Funding for districts in Missouri is obtained from the following sources – Local 58.8%, State 33.0%, and Federal 8.2% resulting in an average expenditure per pupil in Missouri of $9,338.

Part II: Compendium of Findings

Research Questions

The resulting research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What role did the district administration play in the development of the individual schools as Professional Learning Communities?

2. What initial and continued strategies were used by the district administration to support the transition of individual schools from traditional teaching environments to Professional Learning Communities?

3. How was the readiness for change assessed by district administration?

4. What outcomes have occurred due to the implementation of Professional Learning Communities?

5. Has the establishment of Professional Learning Communities had an impact on the behaviors and attitudes of the certified staff?

Protocol

Prior to visiting the three school districts selected for this project, the researcher contacted the superintendents from each district to explain the study, an interest in gathering information from the district, and to ask permission to use the school district for the study. After approval was obtained, the superintendent signed the informed consent form, which had been explained and provided. The researcher then corresponded with the superintendent as well as an assistant superintendent in each district who would facilitate the selection of the focus groups for the project. During the visit to conduct interviews, the researcher spent time with the central office administrators to discuss the project and obtain supporting data for the project.

The researcher followed two ethical guidelines to protect the subjects. Prior to the day of the interviews and focus groups, each subject received an informed consent form describing the study, the use of findings, and ramifications for the participant, as well as a list of the questions they would be asked. Subjects signed the informed consent forms noting their understanding. The form indicated their participation was voluntary, and they could choose to withdraw at any time. Following the sessions, interviewees received an e-mail containing a transcription of their interview for verification that it accurately recorded their responses and intent.

Field Notes

Observations and field notes, gathered during the campus visits to the three school districts, provided first hand data. Each visit allowed the researcher to visit informally with the central office administrators and other school personnel. Information about the school day and the operations of the district buildings added more layers of description and the opportunity to compare these visits with the interviews, focus group, and documents.

Interviews

The researcher conducted personal interviews with the following: a board member from each district, an assistant superintendent from each of the three districts, and the superintendent from two of the districts. Each participant received a copy of the initial questions prior to the interview. Audiotapes, made during each interview, were transcribed verbatim. The researcher e-mailed copies of the transcription to interviewees, asking them to verify the accuracy of their words and intent using member check. Analysis of each interview began following verification from the participants.

Focus Groups

      A focus group from each school district responded to questions, which they had received prior to the session. The focus group in each district consisted of between eight to ten randomly selected members of each Building Leadership Team. Each participant received a copy of the initial questions prior to the focus group interviews. Answers to the listed questions initiated additional questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). After the last question, the researcher invited participants to add any information which would be helpful to the study. Depicted in Tables 1 through 3, which follow, are information related to the participants in the focus groups, their position or role in the district, and the number of years they have served in that capacity in the district for each school.

Table 1 *Participants from School District A*

Interview Type	Participant	Role in District	Years in District
Focus Group	AF1	Elementary Teacher	5
Focus Group	AF2	Elementary Teacher	4
Focus Group	AF3	Elementary Principal	6
Focus Group	AF4	Elementary Teacher	8
Focus Group	AF5	Elementary Teacher	4
Focus Group	AF6	Elementary Principal	4
Focus Group	AF7	Secondary Administrator	12
Focus Group	AF8	Secondary Teacher	8
Focus Group	AF9	Intermediate Teacher	9
Interview	AC1	Superintendent	4
Interview	AC2	Assistant Superintendent	7
Interview	AB1	Board Member	5

Table 2 *Participants from School District* B

Interview Type	Participant	Role in District	Years in District
Focus Group	BF1	Middle School Teacher	12
Focus Group	BF2	Primary Teacher	13
Focus Group	BF3	High School Teacher	20
Focus Group	BF4	High School Teacher	25
Focus Group	BF5	Elementary Teacher	28
Focus Group	BF6	Elementary Teacher	9
Focus Group	BF7	Elementary Librarian	24
Focus Group	BF8	Intermediate Teacher	15
Interview	BC1	Superintendent	7
Interview	BC2	Assistant Superintendent	4
Interview	BB1	Board Member	6

Table 3 *Participants from School District* C

Interview Type	Participant	Role in District	Years in District
Focus Group	CF1	Middle School Principal	12
Focus Group	CF2	Middle School Teacher	15
Focus Group	CF3	High School Librarian	5
Focus Group	CF4	High School Principal	2
Focus Group	CF5	Curriculum Coordinator	25
Focus Group	CF6	Elementary Teacher	22
Focus Group	CF7	Elementary Counselor	15
Focus Group	CF8	Elementary Teacher	4
Focus Group	CF9	Elementary Principal	24
Focus Group	CF10	Elementary Teacher	7
Interview	CC1	Assistant Superintendent	5
Interview	CB1	Board Member	6

Documents

Official school documents as well as historical records assisted in developing a background for this study and allowed triangulation with the data gathered from field observations, interviews, and focus groups (Fowler, 2000). Documents included the following: (1) PLC surveys; (2) PLC evaluation results; (3) Results from Student Success Council meeting; (4) Minutes and agendas from K-12 collaboration; (5) PLC forum agenda and minutes; (6) PLC board evaluation results; (7) District evaluation plans; (8) School website PLC articles; (9) Collaboration work products. Each of these documents was analyzed by the researcher and coded according to the categories established by the interviews and focus group data sets. This enhanced the triangulation of the data.

Research Questions: Analysis of Data

Research Question 1

What role did the district administration play in the development of the individual schools as Professional Learning Communities?

The data suggested that the role of the district administration and the Board of Education have had a direct and essential impact in the successful implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). The data revealed the roles of the district administration included the development of a sense of urgency for change, and the selection and training of staff (including principals and teachers) to implement PLC.

Developing a Sense of Urgency

According to one central office administrator, "Beginning with a board retreat three years ago, we began talking with the board about the four overriding questions of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Most all of our conversations with the board were framed in

terms of these four questions. These conversations played a key role in getting support from the board and helped us in successfully implementing PLC" (AC2). One board member indicated, "We wanted good schools like everyone else does. We knew there was always room for improvement, but NCLB made us focus on everyone" (BB1). Another board member noted, "I felt we were pretty good anyway. But NCLB forced us to try and stay ahead of the curve. We needed to stay on top" (AB1). According to one central office administrator, "With NCLB, we have no sanctions yet, but we need to do a lot of work or we will have sanctions when the bar ratchets up" (CC1). A teacher stated, "The assistant superintendent stressed to all staff members they need to improve – to shift away from what they always had done to meet NCLB requirements" (CF2). According to one building principal, "NCLB made us focus on teaching . . how we teach" (AF6).

One central office administrator indicated, "My role is to force administrators to look at what they are supposed to do on a regular basis. I want them to understand the importance of examining how we do things. Business as usual is not acceptable" (BC1). Another central office administrator stated, "Our test scores were flat, pretty mediocre. We could see our demographics were changing, fewer kids coming from white collar families. Our kids were going to be more of a challenge. We needed to make significant changes" (CC1). According to a teacher, "The district administration and board wanted everyone on the same page. Everybody needed to be working together. The current superintendent conducted book studies and made presentations emphasizing how PLC could help the district meet its challenges" (CF6).

Selection of Staff

Based on interviews, the selection of staff (both teachers and administrators) was critical to the successful implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). According to

one elementary teacher, "Success of PLC comes down to the people you hire. We want to get away from a 'teacher lottery.' We must guarantee each student will get the same thing regardless of the teacher they have" (AF2). Another teacher added, "Our administration has done a great job of hiring people that even if they don't get it (PLC), they are willing to at least give it a shot" (BF6). One central office administrator stated, "Hiring is the most important thing we do. We look for the student-centered teacher. If I get the right person, everyone looks good and more work gets done" (BC1). Another administrator added, "In the past we have hired teachers because it felt right. Now we use a hiring tool to screen specifically for student-centered applicants" (BC2).

According to one elementary teacher,

Our expectations have changed. When I first started, you were asked to do your thing in your room. Suddenly you are asked to be a creative problem solver, critically analyze your work and the work of others, be a part of every process of your craft, and not to wait for the district to tell you everything you do. If you are not involved, you don't know how the parts are related or how it is connected to results. You have to pull your weight during collaboration. Expectations are different. It won't work otherwise. (AF1)

According to many interviewees, leadership is not only important but has different expectations than in the past. One central office administrator highlighted some of the changes when he said, "There is more to the job (principal) than making sure we have toilet paper and the floors are swept" (CC1). One teacher believes PLC may make it easier for principals new to a district because "new principals are able to follow structures already in place. They don't have to start from scratch. It allows for a smooth transition. They don't have to start from square one" (AF5). A counselor agreed when she said, "The continuity of PLC in a building helps in transition when new principals or staff come on board. The collaboration and interventions are already in place" (CF7).

The role of the principals in challenging staff to high expectations is important to central office administrators. One central office administrator summarized what he was concerned about when he said, "I am looking for administrators who can develop relationships with staff, but more importantly, have the courage to confront reality using data and creating systems and processes to eliminate people working in isolation" (AC2). Another central office administrator agreed when he said, "Our job is to select leaders who will confront the facts using data. They must have crucial conversations with staff. If they are not willing to confront these issues, good teachers will leave. We must remove principals not willing to confront issues which are detrimental to our schools" (AC1). Still another central office administrator stated, "Leadership is extremely important when you have to confront resisting teachers. We cannot allow business as usual to continue if it is not working" (CC1).

Many teachers and administrators who were interviewed were looking for leaders who are willing to listen to the ideas of the teachers and work in a collaborative setting. According to one central office administrator, "We have to select leaders willing to build leadership capacity in buildings" (AC2). Another central office administrator sounded a similar idea when he said, "Administrators must model and lead effective collaboration" (CC1). One teacher talked of the collaborative model when she said, "I want a building principal who will work with the staff and value their ideas instead of shouting orders. I need to feel my opinions and ideas are valued" (AF1).

According to another teacher, "It is essential for principals to share leadership. This is a paradigm shift for some principals. They must be willing to relinquish some control and not be threatened by shared leadership" (BF5). A high school principal stated, "It is crucial to have teacher leaders making decisions after consulting building leaders. It is no longer a one-man or

one-woman show with a leader making all of the decisions" (CF4). Another principal agreed when she said, "There is no way possible a principal can know everything that needs to be done. We have experts in the trenches. My job is to manage the school plant and allow the teachers to shine" (CF9). A teacher added, "I believe a good manager / leader provides framework for teachers to do good things" (AF9).

Research Question 2

What initial and continued strategies were used by district administration to support the transition of individual schools from traditional teaching environments to Professional Learning Communities?

Based on data obtained in the interviews, it was apparent the district administration used a number of strategies to support the transition to Professional Learning Communities (PLC). These strategies included a contract to work with the Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDC), support for a variety of methods to foster collaboration, and communication of the purposes, goals, and successes of PLC.

RPDC

Interviews from each district revealed the importance of the work with the RPDC. According to one central office administrator, "Our teacher leaders have spent a lot of time working with the RPDC. They teach you how to collaborate and develop smart goals. Without the RPDC, our success with PLC would not only be limited but slower to develop" (BC2). One teacher spoke of the importance of work with the RPDC when she said, "We took our team to the summer academy sponsored by the RPDC. We have studied with them during the school year. They provide leadership training to our team and then those leaders trained the staff" (BF3). A central office administrator indicated, "Even though our leaders are out of the building

a great deal, the work with the RPDC is essential if districts are to be successful in implementing PLC" (CC1).

Another teacher talked of the importance of working with RPDC when she said, "Districts or schools cannot do it on their own. They must have the RPDC or a similar support system in order to help you through the initial stages" (BF1). A central office administrator stated, "Last year work with the RPDC was a struggle. There were no PLC specialists and we ended up working part-time with two other RPDC districts. This year, our RPDC has two former practitioners in place and their work with the staff has been very beneficial" (CC1). Another central office administrator indicated, "I suppose districts can do it (PLC) without working with an RPDC, but the experiences and resources they offer improve our chances of effectively implementing PLC" (AC1).

Districts agree the support from the RPDC is beneficial. One teacher indicated, "We always learn something from the meetings and often receive affirmation that what we are doing is on the right track. It is a great time to network – with ourselves or other schools" (CF10). Another teacher stated, "The RPDC provides us with new ideas, affirms that what we are doing is good, and gives us assurances that what we are doing is beneficial" (BF7). A third teacher said, "The RPDC has also helped the leadership teams become an active participant in building leadership by working with administration and teachers to form collaborative teams" (AF1).

Focus and Support Collaboration

From evidence gathered during the interview process, it was found that collaboration is handled a variety of ways by districts and by schools within the same district. According to one teacher, "The central office and board support our efforts by having a late start each Thursday allowing us time to collaborate. Also once per month, we have release time to work on

curriculum in reading and math" (BF6). According to a principal in another district, "We have a late start once per week in our school only. It is beneficial, but we never seem to have enough time" (CF4). In the same district, middle school certified staff has two planning periods per day, leading a curriculum coordinator to say, "Our embedded collaboration has allowed us to move more quickly because of our structure. Our building has more buy-in because the PLC concept developed from the bottom up"(CF5). An elementary teacher in a third district indicated, "Our collaboration takes place during our common planning time. Teachers in our building have learned to work together" (AF5). A high school teacher from that district indicated, "Collaboration in the high school is more difficult. Many times, common planning time is not built into the schedule leaving collaboration to occur before or after school" (AF8).

Finding the time to collaborate is a challenge for all districts. A high school teacher said, "While time is tough to find, collaboration with interdisciplinary core teachers allows us to transition from being the 'lone ranger' to working together as high performing teams" (AF8). One central office administrator said, "We don't have the luxury of having common planning times or standard early dismissal / late starts in all of our buildings. It is up to the building leadership teams to come up with a plan to address this situation" (AC2). One teacher expressed her gratitude for the late starts in her district when she said, "Release time is vital for PLC to work. In visiting with leadership teams from other schools who didn't have release time, they indicated they were struggling to find collaborative time" (BF8).

PLC Communication

From the interviews, it is apparent that central office administrators serve as an advocate for PLC. According to one board member, "Our superintendent was involved in starting PLC as a building principal. He was excited and motivated. Others became excited about the PLC

process and it took off rapidly" (BB1). The central office administrator from the same district added, "It was a top down effort. I went and visited with several key people, took some of them to Stevenson High in Lincolnshire, and they became convinced PLC was the way to go" (BC1). A teacher in the same district said, "Our superintendent is passionate about PLC. His excitement makes it hard not to buy-in" (BF5).

A teacher in another district stated, "The superintendent supports the PLC process. He always talks about PLC and shows an interest in what we are doing" (AF9). A principal in that district stated, "I left this district where I was teaching to take a principal job in another district. But I came back as an administrator given the opportunity because I liked the mind set, the culture, and the higher expectations of the PLC" (AF6). According to a central office administrator in the same district, "We communicate about PLC in a variety of ways – at board meetings, at PTA meetings, parent nights, on the website, in the newspaper, at civic organizations and during the monthly superintendent newsletter" (AC1).

According to one teacher, "Our assistant superintendent facilitates building implementation of PLC. He wanted everyone on the same page and working together. He communicates this to us often" (CF8). According to one central office administrator, "Districts need to become involved in all buildings at the same time. Our district began with the high school implementation four years ago. While it paved the way for the other schools, it was lonely for them in the beginning" (BC1). According to another central office administrator, "It is essential for all administrators (building and district) and the board to be together during this process for it to have the maximum possible benefit" (AC1).

Research Question 3

How was the readiness for change assessed by district administration?

Dealing with readiness for change was addressed differently by the three participating districts. In two of the districts, individual schools had began PLC before the districts had began the process district-wide.

Individual Schools

According to one central office administrator, "The high school became involved two years prior to district-wide implementation but the momentum died due to the lack of building leadership. Since the high school had been involved to a degree, many staff members in other buildings got behind the effort and momentum picked up" (AC2). According to a high school teacher in the same district, "The principal had a working knowledge of PLC and began implementation in her building. We visited Lincolnshire and had a good start, but the movement died over a period of two years" (AF8). A secondary teacher who was a teacher and on the leadership team at that time said, "We beat the bushes trying to get support. We tried to sell PLC to everyone. Probably 85-90% bought in to the PLC concept during the first two years" (AF7).

A central office administrator in another district addressed their start as a PLC in their high school when he stated:

> We started PLC at the high school over five years ago with book studies, training, and conversations. We introduced the concepts of mission and vision. I went and recruited several key people and took groups to Stevenson High in Lincolnshire. This was the key. Our teachers saw that kids in Chicago were no different than the ones in our district. We had a small number of people who said we really needed to try something different. (BC1)

A high school teacher from the same district recalled the start when she said, "We started before the rest of the district. Our principal (and current superintendent) at that time devised a plan where we had a 15-minute late start one day per week. The teaching staff came in 15 minutes early which gave us thirty minutes of collaboration. Of course, now we have a late start district-wide" (BF3).

While central office administrators in both of these districts believe the other schools benefited from the high school starting PLC ahead of them, neither would advocate that plan. One central office administrator stated, "While our high school starting the process early helped some of the other schools, I would highly recommend doing PLC district-wide. This allows for the use of a common language and also helps with vertical teaming" (AC2). A central office administrator from another district stated, "You really need to do PLC district-wide. It is much more effective. However if I was a principal, I would do PLC in my building even it wasn't district-wide. It is that powerful" (BC1). A central office administrator whose district implemented PLC district-wide said, "District-wide is the way to go. PLC is not a program but a way of doing business. If it is the way things should be done (and I think it is), why would you want one school to benefit and another not?" (CC1).

Setting the Stage

According to one teacher, "Even though our high school had already implemented PLC, the district-wide effort began when our new superintendent began discussions with the staff about PLC. These were voluntary sessions where he discussed PLC and answered questions" (AF5). According to a central office administrator from the same district, "This allowed the PLC to develop through a 'grass roots' effort rather than mandated from on high. It was cool in that regard" (AC2). In another district, a teacher stated, "The spring before we started, the central office put a 'bug in everyone's ear' about PLC. Our staff was actually allowed to vote to proceed" (BF5). Another teacher added, "The groundwork was laid for at least a year before implementation due largely to the effort by the superintendent to open a dialogue concerning PLC" (CF10). According to another teacher, "NCLB helped develop a sense of urgency to focus

on test scores and results. This created a mindset that we needed to change our way of doing business" (AF4).

All three districts in the study used RPDC to help in the initial stages of the change process. According to a central office administrator in one district, "We had a presentation from RPDC representatives. They sold a high percentage of the staff" (CC1). According to a teacher from another district, "Our district wrote a successful PLC grant to help pay the RPDC fee. Representatives from the RPDC came out, talked to teachers, administrators, and board members to help gain momentum for the change" (AF2). A teacher from a third district indicated, "Our leadership team went to the summer academy and that began our acceptance of the power of PLC. This allowed our team to begin making plans for the implementation process" (BF5).

Research Question 4

What outcomes have occurred due to the implementation of Professional Learning Communities?

According to the participants, there have been many positive outcomes due to the implementation of PLC. These included increased use of collaboration, emphasis on data driven decision-making, improved professional development, and increased leadership capacity.

Collaboration

According to a teacher, "Our teachers are supportive of PLC because of the time we have provided them to collaborate" (BF6). A central office administrator from the same district agreed when she said, "It is great to see the teachers come together and collaborate on an equal basis, trying to figure out what to do. It is very powerful" (BC2). A building administrator from another district added, "There are many positive parts of PLC, but the most powerful part is the collaboration – people working together, looking at best practices which would work for kids"

(CF4). An elementary teacher said, "The collaboration piece is important – we don't want to go back to the old way before collaboration" (CF6).

The collaboration piece also has been beneficial for new teachers. One elementary teacher said, "Our new teachers are far more advanced because of collaboration. PLC districts have to be far ahead of other non-PLC districts" (AF5). According to one board member, "I believe collaboration is positive because it encourages communication, sharing good practices, and eliminating bad ones. They know what each other are doing. On your collaboration team, you don't want to be the odd man out" (AB1). Another board member concurred when he said, "Collaboration encourages more communication – in and between buildings. We are more apt to have the same teaching philosophies and strategies while allowing for individuality of teachers" (BB1). An elementary teacher added, "Collaboration allows us to plan and teach the same curriculum. We look at common assessments with a goal of all students learning the same concept no matter who is teaching the class" (AF1). A central office administrator said, "Everyone realizes how powerful collaboration is. The key is to find the time to do it right" (AC2).

Data Driven Decisions

According to one elementary teacher, "The move to PLC stressed how important it is to look at the data. Meaningful data is essential if we are going to make adjustments in how we teach" (AF4). Another teacher added, "Looking at data during collaboration allows experienced and new teachers to work together in making adjustments" (AF5). A high school teacher stated, "Common assessments allow us to look at data all during the year, not just once a year after MAP tests" (AF8). A building principal indicated, "We use data to better instruct our kids. Data is powerful because it allows us to focus on teaching and learning. It can be fun" (AF6).

A central office administrator stated, "Looking at common assessments is a step in the right direction. When you get MAP results, it is already too late – like doing an autopsy. We have lost too many kids. It is refreshing to see that formative assessments are the expectation" (AC2). According to an elementary teacher, "We have a heavy emphasis this year on formative assessments as a prelude to starting RtI" (BF6). A building principal stated, "While we had an overall increase in MAP scores, just as important to the process are our formative common assessments. These assessments allow us to monitor student progress and make adjustments to our teaching" (CF4). A high school teacher added, "It has been difficult getting our staff to let go of past grading philosophies and move toward more formative assessments. This step has been next to impossible for some of the hard-liners" (CF3). A high school principal stated, "We have to think outside the box. Use of data forces teachers to search for new ways and methods" (CF4).

Improved Professional Development

According to one high school teacher, "There has been a huge shift in district professional development. In the past, it (PD) didn't seem relevant. It is now very productive and very useful. There is a reason and purpose behind professional development" (AF8). An elementary teacher in the same district added, "When I leave professional development now, I feel I have something I can use in my classroom" (AF2). Still another elementary teacher said, "I got onto the professional development committee because I was looking for something like PLC. Our professional development was sporadic. It was given to staff and we were expected to implement it in isolation. Now we have a limited focus and are working together" (AF4). A middle school teacher added, "Involvement in RPDC and PLC has allowed us to push the professional development envelope. Most of our professional development is now related to our

building PLC goals. It is focused – not just professional development for professional development's sake" (CF2).

One central office administrator stated, "Our professional development and PLC is so closely intertwined it is often difficult to tell one from the other. I believe collaboration may be the most powerful professional development tool we have. What better way for our teachers to learn than from each other" (AC2). According to an elementary teacher, "Our professional development began to change before we introduced PLC, but the PLC process accelerated its growth. We have looked at reading across the content area and math strategies conferences. Professional development and our PLC focus are tied together" (CF10). One middle school teacher noted, "The RPDC and PLC has truly changed how we look at professional development. In the past, it was a thing we had to do. Now, I look forward to professional development as a way to improve my teaching skill set" (BF1).

Leadership Capacity

According to an elementary teacher, "In the past, the principal was a fearsome person who made most, if not all, of the decisions in a building. The PLC philosophy of leadership is more democratic. Voices are heard. Teachers speak through PLC. The process is valuable" (AF5). His principal added, "90% of our decisions are made by the leadership team. The team represents the whole building. It is essential to develop and sustain leadership throughout the building" (AF6). Another teacher added, "In the past, we always felt comfortable asking the principal. Now, we have trust in our teams. We no longer need to ask permission from our principal. The teachers have the power to make changes to help us reach our goals" (AF1).

One central office administrator stated, "Successful leaders in PLC must approach leadership differently. You can either share leadership naturally or you can learn it. You have to

allow others to lead. If you cannot do that, you cannot be a PLC leader" (BC1). Another central office administrator added, "Leaders in PLC must be able to disperse leadership throughout the building. This begins with the ability to lead collaboration. Everyone wants to be a leader at some point. I encourage building principals to build that capacity" (AC2). According to a building principal, "By working together, we can achieve more. Teacher leaders are invaluable" (CF9). A teacher added, "Teachers are willing to take leadership on. We want to move in that direction. It is crucial to have teacher leaders making decisions after consulting building leaders" (CF2). An intermediate teacher added, "Leadership teams have the 'go to' people who can answer questions and are considered experts in the buildings. Our leadership teams often run our late start meetings" (BF8).

Research Question 5

Has the establishment of Professional Learning Communities had an impact on the behaviors and attitudes of the certified staff?

Based on interviews conducted for this project, it is apparent there have been some positive changes in the behaviors and attitudes of the certified staff in each of the three school districts. These positive changes included improved relationships between staff members, emphasis on the success of individual students, and working together as a collaborative team.

Staff Relationships

According to one building principal, "Our focus is on the process and most importantly, working with others" (AF3). A teacher added, "You must focus on the human element. We must nurture people and work together. We cannot reach our full potential without the human element" (AF4). There have been difficulties to work through. One elementary teacher said:

> We never pretended everyone was going to jump on board and it was going to be great. We went into it with a purposeful mind set. We didn't pretend everything

was going to be smooth. We knew it was not going to be comfortable for you if you were not willing to participate. But that was their choice. (AF2).

A high school principal talked of the difficulties when he said, "I have teachers who said they didn't think they could teach this way. They said we were not holding kids responsible" (CF4).

According to a central office administrator, "You can tell a team which has developed trust among its members. Team members who trust each other can have open discussions and feel free to disagree with each other. It probably doesn't happen enough" (BC1). One teacher indicated, "A lot of our staff wondered aloud why we spent so much time working on team building. The team building helped lessen anxiety and build trust among staff members. We work on this at the beginning of each year" (BF4). An elementary teacher summed her feeling about PLC when she added, "For me, PLC has been transformational. We have gone from being autonomous units to working together. We don't think anymore of 'my students.' They are now all 'our students'" (BF5). A curriculum coordinator added, "We are headed down the right road. It feels good to see people bending over backwards to make sure kids learn" (CF5).

Emphasis on Individual Students

According to an individual teacher, "PLC has made us better at our jobs. We do more for kids. It has helped us fill in the gaps in order to help struggling kids" (AF1). Another teacher added, "We didn't understand the data in the past. We had no feel for what individual students needed. All of the pressure to perform on the MAP test fell on the 3rd and 4th grade teachers. Now we are united to help all students" (AF2). One board member stated, "I had some skepticism in the beginning, but the idea that we help not only struggling kids, but students at all levels sold me" (AB1). Another board member concurred when he said, "Instead of addressing groups of students, we felt PLC could help individual students" (CB1).

One teacher indicated, "In my building, many teachers thought it was all the kids could do because they didn't have support from home. Now the teachers have changed and see the students can succeed. The RtI piece will further address individual students" (CF6). One central office administrator added, "Teachers have taken ownership in the fact that 'all kids matter.' We ask teachers to take responsibility rather than assessing blame" (AC2). Another central office administrator added, "We are OK on the K-6 level. Grades 7-12 still have a lot of work to do. We have some who believe it is my job to teach and the student's job to learn" (AC1).

A central office administrator stated, "We have many teachers who would like for us to allow them to close the door and let them do their thing. They have been left alone for years. We are looking to change that and look for them to take ownership in assuring individual students are successful" (CC1). An elementary teacher added, "PLC is the best thing I have experienced in all of my years in education. I go home at night with the feeling I have made a difference in the lives of my students" (BF5). An intermediate teacher said, "We have experienced a cultural shift. We now understand different students have different needs. We are looking closely at interventions to help them" (AF9).

Collaborative Teams

One teacher described his idea about collaboration when he said, "The way I view collaboration is we used to be a one-person sandwich shop. Now we are a full-fledged restaurant where everyone needs everyone else. My success depends upon others. We all profit in the end" (AF4). Another teacher added, "Instead of me being the 'queen of the classroom' we are a team" (AF9). A central office administrator indicated, "We want our collaboration to focus on results. It doesn't matter how you 'feel' about the school, what matters is results" (AC2). Another central office administrator said, "Collaboration has allowed us to accomplish some outstanding things.

Our two largest elementary schools have common planning time to collaborate. It is up to the individual buildings how to get collaboration time" (CC1).

A teacher indicated, "Collaboration is a new way of doing business for many of us. It has made it necessary to come out of our comfort zone. We have to be willing to take risks. It creates a climate for honest teacher discussions" (BF4). Another teacher added, "The intervention piece seems to be a lot of work. However, collaboration has made my daily job easier. It allows us to work smarter, not necessarily harder" (CF8). Another teacher agreed when she added, "Collaboration helps you with what you need to do to make sure learning occurs. In collaboration, teachers get together and look at learning. It is a big shift from 'my kids' to 'our kids'. We all have strengths, are willing to share strategies and work together on student learning" (CF6). An intermediate teacher said, "Collaboration forces you to think of the big picture, not just about one small classroom with twenty kids" (AF8).

Summary

Presented in Chapter Four were the demographic data for the three districts included in the study. A description of the protocol used in the study, including the methods of data collection and the process of analysis followed. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then used to provide information to address each of the five research questions. In Chapter Five, an overview of the design and procedures employed for the study are described. A discussion of the findings of the study with limitations and design control are included. In addition, implications for practice and recommendations for further research are presented.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This research study was conducted to examine the role of the central office

administration in the implementation of Professional Learning Communities in three school

districts. Specifically, the researcher examined how the central office administration assessed

readiness for change as well as strategies used to support the continued development of

Professional Learning Communities. The study also investigated what outcomes occurred as a

result of the implementation of Professional Learning Communities and the impact on the

behaviors and attitudes of the certified staff. Provided in this chapter are the purpose of the study

and the design and procedures employed throughout the study. Findings are discussed, along

with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to focus on outcomes, behaviors, and attitudes which have

occurred or been developed in schools who have successfully implemented Professional

Learning Communities. The researcher also studied the roles of the district administration in

assessing the readiness for change and in the implementation and support for Professional

Learning Communities.

The rationale for the study emerged from an examination of the research literature on the

development of schools as Professional Learning Communities. A view of the relevant literature

revealed the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) in 2001 created a greater emphasis

on school district accountability based on individual student achievement (Bracey, 2002;

Darling-Hammond, 2007). While several researchers argued that NCLB failed to address and

sometimes increased problems faced by school districts (Darling-Hammond, 2007: Meier, 2004), it has forced school districts to change the way they operate. A new set of challenges await educators (Schmoker, 2006). While changing to improve the quality of education sounds promising, change is not readily embraced by all educators (Schmoker, 2006). Many educators have become complacent over time and administrators are charged with creating a sense of urgency in order to facilitate any change process (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Leadership is an important concept in American society especially when addressing school improvement. Leadership impacts the performance of any organization, especially those organizations that have made the decision to begin change initiatives (Collins, 2001; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). Traditionally, the role of the leader has been that of a bold action-oriented figure who solves problems and uses his personality to recruit others (Collins). Although this type of leadership may still be admired by many in today's society, most research calls for a more participatory approach to leadership (Blankstein, 2004). If an organization is to be successful, the concept of leadership must be broad-based, and not confined to a single person (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001; Fullan, 2005; and Lambert, 1998). The development of leadership capacity is essential to the transformation of our educational system (Conzemius & O'Neill; Katz & Earl, 2006). Features which are pre-requisites for high leadership capacity schools include a shared vision, inquiry-based use of data, reflective practice, collaboration, and collective responsibility for student achievement (Newman & Wehlage, 1995).

The district leadership must take the lead in developing resources to improve student achievement. Leaving the issue of school improvement to each individual school to resolve on its own does not result in more effective schools (Elmore, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Schlechty, 2005).

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Building the capacity for change begins when the board of education and district administration demonstrate support by reading research, attending conferences, visiting similar schools, engaging in ongoing dialogue, and empowering the staff (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2002; Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008). There are calls for schools to abandon approaches known as strategic planning, systemic reform, and whole-school reform, all of which have failed to provide meaningful changes to meet the ever-increasing demands placed on public schools (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, Schmoker, 2006). There seems to be growing support for the use of Professional Learning Communities as a vehicle to provide schools with the best chance to initiate change (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, Fullan, 2006; Joyce, 2004). According to Darling Hammond (1996), "The Commission recommends that schools be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers; organizations that respect learning, honor teaching, and teach for understanding" (p. 198).

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What role did the district administration play in the development of the individual schools as Professional Learning Communities?

2. What initial and continued strategies were used by district administration to support the transition of individual schools from traditional teaching environments to Professional Learning Communities

3. How was readiness for change assessed by district administration?

4. What outcomes have occurred due to the implementation of Professional Learning Communities?

5. Has the establishment of Professional Learning Communities had an impact on the behaviors and attitudes of the certified staff?

Design and Procedures

The researcher chose a qualitative case study design was chosen to achieve an understanding of the role of the central office administration in the development of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). The sampling plan was two-phased. The first phase, which was purposeful in selection, involved identifying schools where PLC has been successfully implemented. A representative from each of the Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDC) in Missouri (n=9) was conducted, and asked each of them to identify two school districts where PLC had been successfully implemented. Criteria for this identification included districts which had district-wide implementation, had been implementing PLC for a minimum of three years, and were actively engaged in professional development to support and sustain PLC. The districts selected were considered representative of the state from which they were selected because geographically the nine RPDC areas from which the three school districts were selected represent a cross section of all the districts in the state. Next, permission from the Superintendent of Schools in each of the districts was obtained agreeing to participation by staff in their district.

Central office administrators, board members and focus group members (selected from the building leadership teams) were contacted to schedule interview times and location. Data were collected from 2008 through 2009. This included structured face-to-face interviews with superintendents, central office administrators, and board of education members of selected schools. Focus group interviews were conducted with randomly selected members of building leadership teams in each district. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with central office administrators and board members consisting of open-ended questions relating to the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities (PLC), the role of district administration in the development of PLC and the impact of the establishment of PLC on the certified staff.

The researcher used the same questions for the focus groups as were used in the interview protocol for the central office administrators and board members. The focus groups occurred at the various school settings lasting approximately one hour for each group. Observations were also used for participants in their school settings, including both verbal and nonverbal communication. Additionally, field notes were taken during the observations and interviews. Individual review of the transcripts, field observations, logs, notes, and patterns of responses emerged by coding categories that allowed the researcher to look for consistency and triangulation.

Findings

School districts are being challenged as they never have been before. New state and federal accountability standards focus on improvement of individual students (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004). Failure to meet these accountability standards threatens districts with sanctions including the loss of accreditation, loss of funding, and loss of control (Darling-Hammond, 2007). These accountability standards have forced school districts to make changes looking for better ways to meet the needs of their students. Implementation of Professional Learning Communities has been trumpeted as the best way of making changes necessary to improve student achievement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2006; Joyce, 2004). Change is complex and uncomfortable, often generates division and conflict, creates insecurity and fear, and often does not proceed smoothly (Kotter, 1996; O'Neill, 2000). All of this was evident from the data sets for this study. In analyzing the data obtained from the interviews, themes have emerged, each of which might have an effect on the culture of each district. Four themes emerged from this study. They were: 1) the changing dynamics of leadership, 2) development of a sense of collective

efficacy and responsibility for student learning, 3) emphasis on collaborative teams versus isolation, and 4) the use of data to drive improved instruction.

Changing Dynamics of Leadership

The face of leadership has changed. According to the data, building principals are called upon to be instructional leaders as opposed to past job descriptions as managers of the building. They are also charged with fostering collaboration between and among staff members as well as developing leadership throughout the building (AC2, BC1). The data also suggested that central office administrators are looking for building principals who set high expectations for themselves, confront resisting teachers, and yet still develop positive relations with the staff (CC1). According to central office administrators, it is no longer enough for building principals to simply be managers – they must be willing to embrace a new type of leadership (AC2, BC1, and CC1). From this data, it can be concluded principals in Professional Learning Communities schools must shift from traditional leadership roles where they were autocratic leaders trying to keep the building operational to leaders who have the ability to share leadership and be instructional leaders (AF6, AF3).

Principals in PLC schools must adopt a participatory approach toward leadership and show willingness not only to share leadership, but also to develop leaders among the staff (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). According to the data, a great deal of this leadership is found in the leadership teams. Leadership teams serve as a voice for teachers in the building. The use of leadership teams in the decision-making processes increases the likelihood the staff will buy in to necessary changes (AF2, AF5, and CF5). From the data, it can be concluded that when teachers become involved in this process, their involvement also fosters trust among the teachers and aids

in the development of a collective efficacy and gives them hope great things can be accomplished (AC2, AF1).

The data suggested there is a need for a different type of leadership which makes it essential for the central office to consider during the hiring process. While principals still need to manage the operation of the building, the search for a principal must involve a quest to find an individual who can be an instructional leader and who also has the ability to develop leadership capacity (AC1, AC2). The central office administrators in this study agreed that if you cannot embrace the concept of shared leadership, you cannot be a PLC leader (AC2, BC1, and CC1).

Development of Collective Efficacy / Accepting Collective Responsibility

The success of individual students is the main component of federal and state accountability. Therefore, a primary component of Professional Learning Communities needs to be the acceptance of a collective responsibility for the success of every student (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The data in this study suggested that if the staff accepts this responsibility, it is much easier for them to buy in to the other components of Professional Learning Communities – collaboration, the use of data to adjust instruction, and interventions to help struggling learners (AF9, BF5, and CFR6). Collective efficacy demands a shift in thinking for many educators (Blankstein, 2004, Schmoker, 2006). Educators in the past have been quick to blame factors outside of their control for unsuccessful students – poverty, race, parenting, legal issues, student apathy, and the quality of students (Blankstein). According to the data, teachers involved in this study spoke of past practices where unsuccessful students often were summarily sent to Title 1 or Special Education programs or were destined to become dropouts at the age of sixteen (AF1, CF5). The data also suggested that districts in this study have practiced social promotion in the

past where individual students were passed on from one grade to the next regardless of their level of mastery of essential skills (AC1, BC1).

According to the teachers in this study, the acceptance of collective responsibility for student learning forces teachers and administrators to view each individual child as they progress through the system and make necessary adjustments when students are not successful (AF9, BF5, and CF5). The data suggested that teachers take ownership for all students in the building and become united in an effort to ensure student success (AF5, CF6). An individual Title 1 teacher spoke of how staff in her building have been amazed at the success of students when interventions were put in place (CF6). Another elementary teacher spoke of the effect she believes she is making in the lives of her students because she has become convinced that all students can learn provided interventions are in place (BF5). According to participants in each district, however, there remains a diminishing group of staff members who still believe this journey to be a futile effort to help lower-performing students (AF5, BF3, and CF4). Thus, from the data, you can conclude that this reluctance makes it essential for administrators not only to move these people along, but also to pay special attention to hiring student-centered applicants who share the belief all students can master required competencies given the time, support, and interventions (AC2, BC1, and CC1).

Collaboration versus Isolationism

Once the teachers accept the responsibility for the success of individual students, collaboration becomes a powerful tool for teachers (Blankstein, 2004). Work in collaborative teams is a concept which is foreign to many educators (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). For many years, teachers worked in isolation, asking to be left alone as they practiced their craft (Schmoker, 2006). The result was a group of teachers working as independent contractors, each working

individually to meet the needs of their students. In the era before accountability increased to its current level, isolation was accepted practice (Blankstein). The data in this study suggested schools found that teachers teaching the same subject or in the same grade level were often working on different things at different times and having a wide range of levels of success (AC1, AF8, and BC1). The data also suggested collaboration is one method of attempting to guarantee all students will be taught the same thing while still allowing for teacher individuality (AF1, BF8).

According to the data, another powerful component of PLC is providing for teachers to work together, examine the data, and make adjustments in how they teach a particular lesson or concept. Teachers plan together and teach the same curriculum (AF2, CF6). The data also suggested collaboration is a new way of doing business, moving teachers from working as autonomous units toward becoming high-performing collaborative teams (AF5, CF8). Interviews further suggested that many teachers view collaboration as one of the most powerful professional development activities they have been involved in (AF5, CF5). It can, therefore, be concluded that collaboration is an extremely useful tool for beginning teachers or teachers new to a school district or individual school. It provided a safety net for new teachers as they face struggles which can seem overwhelming at times (CF8, BF5).

According to the interviews, different districts and schools within the same district schedule collaboration based on building needs. One of the districts in this study has scheduled collaboration district-wide, beginning school one hour later one day per week. Teachers in this district believe this schedule was one of the primary reasons teachers have embraced Professional Learning Communities – emphasizing the importance of making time available (BC2, BF7, BF1). The data also showed another district has a late start for the high school only,

leaving other schools within the district to find time for collaboration – using either common planning time or time before and after school (CC1). Examination of the data further revealed a third district leaves it entirely up to the individual schools, making collaboration more difficult to implement in some schools and less consistent throughout the district (AC1, AC2). It can be concluded from the data that most educators are united in their beliefs that effective use of collaboration is the cornerstone of Professional Learning Communities (AC2, BF3, and CF4).

Use of Data to Improve Instruction

The use of data is essential to the success of Professional Learning Communities (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Once districts have established what they want their students to learn, it becomes necessary to assess their progress. In the past, most teachers have conducted assessments solely as culminating events, tested what students have learned and used those test results to assign a grade (Blankstein, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). An important component of Professional Learning Communities is the use of formative assessments, which provides teachers with evidence of what students have learned. This evidence is to be used primarily to make adjustments and re-teach, allowing struggling students to exhibit mastery (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Historically, many schools have viewed Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) testing as the primary measure of student learning. According to the data in this inquiry, schools now use formative assessments throughout the year to provide benchmarks of student progress (AF1, BF5). The data further suggested these assessments allow schools to monitor student progress during the course of the year and make adjustments well before MAP testing (AC1, BC1). Examining the data further revealed that monitoring the use of data becomes the responsibility of the building principal or leadership team. When teachers meet during collaboration or common

planning time, the focus must be on the data (AF2, CF1). While the teachers may believe they

are doing a great job, a summary of the data provides us with the evidence. Data are powerful

and can be scary for teachers. Thus it is essential to develop a culture of trust which will allow

teachers to be comfortable in looking at the data (AF6, BF8, CF5).

Implications for Practice

The establishment of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) is a journey or a process

as opposed to a program. If implemented successfully, the PLC process is a way to change the

culture to focus on individual student achievement that can be tracked and monitored by the use

of data. The implementation of PLC is not easy – it is hard work, and it takes time. Although a

sense of urgency must be established and pressure needs to be constantly applied, districts cannot

rush into PLC. PLC can be most successful when it is a district-wide initiative, becomes

embedded in the culture, and becomes institutionalized so that when a leader leaves, the process

continues. Initially the superintendent must set the stage or lay the groundwork if PLC is to be

successful. The administration must work with the board of education, the administrative team,

the building leadership team, and individual staff members. To begin the process, having the

support of the board of education is essential.The initial work can be done by using book studies,

hearing outside speakers, attending conferences or workshops, by visiting other schools or school

districts, and by communicating with stakeholders from other school districts.

Districts embarking on the PLC journey must understand that the dynamics of leadership

must be different from traditional forms of leadership. The building principal must be a

collaborative leader. Although principals are expected to set high expectations, apply pressure to

staff members, and confront resistors, they must work with leadership teams to distribute

leadership throughout the staff members. Teachers on the leadership team assist other teachers in

the process and become leaders during the collaborative team meetings. Once the process of PLC becomes embedded in the culture, all staff members, and not just the building administrators, become responsible for monitoring staff commitment and performance.

While it is essential for PLC to be a district-wide initiative, the rate of implementation will vary from school to school depending upon the leadership as well as the culture. Administrators in individual buildings must help change the culture, create a common vocabulary and provide training for staff if they are to be successful. The collaborative meetings need to be different from department meetings of the past and not be used for administrative tasks. The meetings must focus on student achievement, curriculum, and improved teaching methods. The administrator\must guarantee staff involvement in collaboration, emphasize the importance of looking at data when making decisions about instruction, and protect the collaboration time from shifting to working on district or building administrative tasks.

The use of the Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDC) or another outside consultant is instrumental in the successful implementation of PLC. An RPDC representative can often say things to staff which will be accepted even if the staff has been resistant to similar presentations from the building administration. The RPDC can assist in providing direction, work with staff about what needs to be done as well as when it needs to be done, teach staff how to collaborate or run a meeting, and work with the leadership teams to facilitate team building. PLC can be done without the assistance of an outside consultant, but the chances of success will be less, the development will take longer, and the process will be more likely to be sidetracked by hurdles or roadblocks.

The chances of success of the PLC process will be greater if it is a district-wide initiative. Staff throughout the district will speak a common language and be able to work together to solve

common problems. If the district truly believes that PLC will improve student achievement, the commitment should be made to work on PLC throughout the district. If the PLC process is going to continue, the process must become institutionalized. This level of commitment will allow for continuity when a board changes, a new superintendent comes to the district, or a principal leaves the building.

During the implementation of PLC, the district needs to be aware of potential pitfalls or roadblocks. The administration must understand the effect culture can have on impeding change initiatives. Educators often fear change and are resistant to anything which gets them out of their comfort zone. PLC may well be met with resistance by educators because of past failed initiatives and be viewed as another in a long line of new innovations which will change every two years. Leaders must understand how difficult change is. Districts must understand the implantation of PLC, even if done properly and successfully, may not yield the type of immediate change many will expect.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from this study as well as current literature (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2006; Schmoker, 2004) indicated the transformation of schools into Professional Learning Communities has a positive effect on student achievement as well as on the attitudes of the certified staff. This study also indicated there were positive effects related to the establishment of high-performing collaborative teams, the use of data to improve instruction, and the development of leadership capacity among certified staff members. Further research is needed to study the long-term success of schools who have implemented Professional Learning Communities.

During this study, many participants cited the importance of the building principal to the success of Professional Learning Communities, especially in the early phases of the implementation process. Future studies are needed to examine the myriad of leadership styles on the success of PLC. Additionally, a number of participants in this study cited the implementation of the initial phases of Response to Intervention (RtI) as a way to address unsuccessful students. An area of future study is needed to examine the impact of RtI on student achievement in PLC schools.

The need for time as an important component of the PLC process was cited by many of the participants. Further study is needed to compare schools that have collaboration during the school day (common planning period) to schools that have established other alternatives such as late school starts or early school outs as a time for collaboration. Additionally, the last area of future study is needed to compare the success of Professional Learning Communities in elementary schools versus success in secondary schools.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to add to the body of knowledge concerning the implementation of Professional Learning Communities in K-12 school districts. The researcher focused on the role of the central office administration in the development of Professional Learning Communities, as well as the outcomes due to the implementation of PLC and the change of beliefs and attitudes of the certified staff during this implementation process.

Evidence suggested that the development of Professional Learning Communities is viewed by many researchers and practitioners as the best process to assist schools in making necessary changes to meet the ever-increasing demands placed on public education. The results of this study revealed that board members, administrators (both central office and building), and

teachers agreed that Professional Learning Communities have provided staff with additional

tools to have a greater impact on student achievement. Evidence also suggested that Professional

Learning Communities have helped change the culture in these districts by creating high-

performing collaborative teams, developing a school-wide or district-wide sense of efficacy, and

establishing an emphasis on using data to improve instruction. Suggested further research from

Chapter Five could further increase the body of knowledge on the impact of Professional

Learning Communities on student achievement.

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Appendix A

Letters

1. Superintendent Permission for School District Participation Letter

2. Superintendent Permission for School District Participation Form

3. Letter of Informed Consent – Focus Group

4. Informed Consent Form – Superintendent / Designee

5. Informed Consent Form – Board Member

6. Informed Consent Form – Focus Group

7. Thank You Letter

Superintendent Permission for School District Participation Letter

Dear Superintendent,

I am conducting a research study titled, *The Role of District Administration in the Establishment of Professional Learning Communities.* This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Missouri-Columbia. The research gathered should be helpful in providing insight into leadership capacity and school improvement. The findings could serve to assist schools in the establishment of Professional Learning Communities for sustaining school improvement and impacting student achievement.

For the study, school districts who had successfully implemented Professional Learning Communities were selected from Missouri. I am seeking your permission as the superintendent of the *<Name Here>* School District to contact a board member (one you choose) and members of the building PLC leadership teams for the purpose of inviting the teaching staff to participate in this study.

The board member of your school district will be invited to participate in a one-on-one interview comprised of ten open-ended questions. In addition, a random selected group of teachers (members of PLC leadership teams) will be invited to participate in a focus group interview session comprised of ten open-ended questions. A copy of the questions, interview protocol, focus group protocol, and informed consent letters are attached for your review.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. The participants may withdraw from participation at any time they wish without penalty, including in the middle of or after completion of the focus group and/or individual interview. Participants' answers and the building's identity will remain confidential, anonymous, and separate from any identifying information. I will not list any names of participants, or their corresponding institutions, in my dissertation or any future publications of this study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns about participation either by phone at (816) 637-2595, or by fax at (816) 630-9203, or by email at jhorton@estigers.k12.mo.us. In addition, you are also welcome to contact the dissertation advisor for this research study, Dr. Barbara Martin, who can be reached at (660) 543-8823 or by email at bmartin@ucmo.edu.

If you choose to allow me to contact a board member and the school district staff regarding participation in this study, please complete the attached permission form. A copy of this letter and your written consent should be retained by you for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration.
Jim Horton
Doctoral Candidate

Superintendent Permission for School District Participation Form

I, _____grant permission for a board member and district staff of the *<Name Here>* School District to be contacted regarding participation in the study of District Administration in the Establishment of Professional Learning Communities being conducted by Jim Horton.

By signing this permission form, I understand that the following safeguards are in place to protect teaching staff choosing to participate:

1. All confidential responses will be used for dissertation research and potential future publications.
2. All participation is voluntary, and may be withdrawn at any point in the study prior to submission of the survey.
3. All identities will be protected in all reports of the research.
4. Any consent or refusal to participate in this study will not affect the employment of participants in any way.

Please keep the letter and a copy of the signed permission form for your records. If you choose to grant permission for a board member and district staff of the *<Name Here>* School District to participate in this study, please complete the *Superintendent Permission for School Participation Form*, seal it in the enclosed envelope and return to Jim Horton as soon as possible.

I have read the material above, and any questions that I have posed have been answered to my satisfaction. I grant permission for a board member and district staff of the *<Name Here>* School District to be contacted and invited to participate in this study.

_____ _____
Superintendent's Signature   Date

<div align="center">**Letter of Informed Consent Form**
Interview</div>

Dear Participant:

Thank you for considering participation in a research study titled, *The Role Central Office Administration in the Establishment of Professional Learning Communities*. This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Missouri-Columbia. The information gathered should be useful in the field of school leadership and school improvement. Your participation has been approved by your Superintendent and Principal.

Researcher: Jim Horton, University of Missouri-Columbia Doctoral Candidate, jhorton@estigers.k12.mo.us, (816) 637-2595.

Advisor: Dr. Barbara Martin, 4105 Lovinger Hall, University of Central Missouri, (660) 543-8823, bmartin@ucmo.edu

Procedures: For the study, school districts who have successfully implemented Professional Learning Communities from Missouri have been selected. From the selected schools, teachers are invited to participate in a one hour focus group interview comprised of 10 open-ended questions. The focus group interview will be informal and you are free to answer the questions you choose, and pass on those that you do not wish to answer. The focus group interview will be recorded and then transcribed verbatim for use by the researcher. Teachers in this study must be currently employed at the school building and 18 years of age to participate.

Participation: Participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from participation at any time you wish without penalty, including in the middle of the focus group interview or after it is completed. Your consent to participate or refusal to participate will not affect your employment in any way. You may also decline to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns about your participation. You can call me at 816-637-2595. In addition, you are also welcome to contact the dissertation advisor for this research study, Dr. Barbara Martin, who can be reached at 660-543-8823.

Confidentiality: Tapes and transcripts will remain confidential, anonymous, and separate from any identifying information. A pseudonym will be assigned to responses for use by the researcher. You will have the opportunity to verify the transcribed interview for accuracy of what was stated and what you intended. Edits, deletions, and clarifications will be made immediately to the transcript to comply with your right to voluntarily release data. Only the researcher and the dissertation supervisor will have access to identifiable data. Collected data will be kept locked and destroyed three years after completion of this study.

Your identity and your building's identity will be confidential and remain anonymous in the reporting of results. I will not list any names of participants, or their corresponding institutions, in my dissertation or any future publications of this study.

This research has been preauthorized by the Institutional Review Board-IRBs of the University of Missouri-Columbia. If you have further questions regarding research participants' rights, please contact the University of Missouri-Columbia Campus Institutional Review Board at (573) 882-9585, or visit http://www.research.missouri.edu/cirb/index.htm or http://ohrp.osophs.dhhs.gov/humansubjects/guidance/ 45cfr46.htm For inquiries about the survey or your participation, please contact the researcher Jim Horton by phone at (816) 637-2595, or by fax at (816) 630-9203, or by email at jhorton@estigers.k12.mo.us. You may also contact the dissertation supervisor Dr. Barbara Martin at (660) 543-8823.

Injuries: The University of Missouri does not compensate human subjects if discomfort eventually results from the research. Nonetheless, the university holds medical, professional, and general liability insurance coverage, and provides its own medical attention and facilities if participants suffer as a direct result of negligence or fault from faculty or staff associated with the research. In such unlikely event, the Risk Management Officer should be contacted immediately at (573) 882-3735 to obtain a review of the matter and receive specific information. Related ethical guidelines about Protection of Human Subjects set forth in the Code of Federal Regulations "45 CFR 46" will be upheld. This statement is not to be construed as an admission of liability.

Risks and Benefits: The risk of your participation in the study is minimal. The research gathered should be helpful in providing insight into leadership capacity and school improvement. The findings could serve to assist schools in establishing Professional Learning Communities for sustaining school improvement and impacting student achievement.

If you have questions regarding your teachers' rights as a participant in research, please feel free to contact the University of Missouri-Columbia campus Institutional Review Board at 573-882-9585.

.
If you choose to participate in this study, please complete the attached consent form. A copy of this letter and your written consent should be retained by you for future reference. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jim Horton
Doctoral Candidate

Informed Consent Form – Superintendent / Designee

I, _____agree to participate in the study of central office leadership in the establishment of Professional Learning Communities being conducted by Jim Horton.

By signing this consent form and participating in a one-on-one interview, I understand that the following safeguards are in place to protect me:

1. My responses will be used for dissertation research and potential future publications.
2. My participation is voluntary, and may be withdrawn at any point in the study prior to submission of the survey.
3. My identity will be protected in all reports of the research.
4. My consent or refusal to participate in this study will not affect my employment in any way.

Please keep the consent letter and a copy of the signed consent form for your records.

I have read the material above, and any questions that I have posed have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

_____ _____
Participant's Signature   Date

You will be contacted to set up a date, location, and time for your interview.

Informed Consent Form – Board Member

I, _____agree to participate in the study of central office leadership in the establishment of Professional Learning Communities being conducted by Jim Horton.

By signing this consent form and participating in the one-on-one interview, I understand that the following safeguards are in place to protect me:

1. My responses will be used for dissertation research and potential future publications.
2. My participation is voluntary, and may be withdrawn at any point in the study prior to submission of the survey.
3. My identity will be protected in all reports of the research.
4. My consent or refusal to participate in this study will not affect my employment in any way.

Please keep the consent letter and a copy of the signed consent form for your records.

I have read the material above, and any questions that I have posed have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

_____ _____
Participant's Signature   Date

You will be contacted to set up the date, location, and time for your one-on-one interview.

Informed Consent Form – Leadership Team Members

I, _____agree to participate in the study of central office leadership in the establishment of Professional Learning Communities being conducted by Jim Horton.

By signing this consent form and participating in the focus group interview, I understand that the following safeguards are in place to protect me:

1. My responses will be used for dissertation research and potential future publications.
2. My participation is voluntary, and may be withdrawn at any point in the study prior to submission of the survey.
3. My identity will be protected in all reports of the research.
4. My consent or refusal to participate in this study will not affect my employment in any way.

Please keep the consent letter and a copy of the signed consent form for your records.

I have read the material above, and any questions that I have posed have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

_____ _____
Participant's Signature   Date

The date, location, and time for the focus group interview at your school will be arranged and notification will be sent to you.

Thank You Letter

Date

<Title><First Name><Last Name>
<Position>
<School District>
<Address>

Dear <Title><Last Name>,

I would like to express sincere gratitude that you took time from your busy schedule to help me with my research study. The information from your interview will be very helpful in providing insight into central office leadership and Professional Learning Communities. The findings could serve to assist schools in the establishment of Professional Learning Communities for sustaining school improvement and impacting student achievement.

I want to reassure you that I will maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of your participation and responses, both in my dissertation project and in all future published research on this topic.

I welcome you to call me should you wish to provide any additional insight or documentation that you feel will further enrich my study.

Sincerely,

Jim Horton
Doctoral Candidate
University of Missouri-Columbia
(816) 637-2595
jhorton@estigers.k12.mo.us

Appendix B

Instruments

1. Interview Protocol – District Administrator

2. Interview Protocol – Board Member

3. Interview Protocol – Focus Groups

4. Observation Analysis

Interview Questions for District Administrator

Date: _____   Start Time: _____

Questions	Information
1. Tell me your name, title and involvement with Professional Learning Communities.	Learn about participant and PLC
2. Why did your district implement Professional Learning Communities? Probe: Test scores, failing students	Historical background of district performance
3. Describe the process used by the district to implement Professional Learning Communities.	Q1: District role Q2: Initial strategies Q3: Change readiness
4. How did the district administration support the transition to Professional Learning Communities?	Q1: District role Q2: Initial strategies
5. In what ways do you feel the district administration could provide additional support?	Q1: District role Q2: Strategies

6. What currently does the district administration do to support PLC?	Q1: District role Q2: Strategies
7. How is time provided for teachers to work in collaborative teams? Probe: Is it used effectively? How do you know?	Q2: Strategies
8. How has the level of expectations changed for the staff as a result of PLC? Changed for students?	Q4: Outcomes of PLC
9. How have student outcomes changed as a result of Professional Learning Communities?	Q4: Outcomes of PLC

10. Do you feel the teachers are better equipped to provide a quality education for our students as a result of PLC? Probe: Give examples	Q4: Outcomes of PLC Q5: Staff attitudes

11. How do you feel the attitudes of the certified staff have changed as a result of Professional Learning Communities? Probe: Give examples	Q4: Outcomes of PLC Q5: Staff attitudes

<u>Interview Questions for Board Member</u>

Date: _____   Start Time: _____

Questions	Information
1. Tell me your name, title and involvement with Professional Learning Communities.	Learn about participant and PLC
2. Why did your district implement Professional Learning Communities? Probe: Test scores, failing students	Historical background of district performance
3. Describe the process used by the district to implement Professional Learning Communities.	Q1: District role Q2: Initial strategies Q3: Change readiness
4. How did the district administration support the transition to Professional Learning Communities?	Q1: District role Q2: Initial strategies
5. In what ways do you feel the district administration could provide additional support?	Q1: District role Q2: Strategies

6. What currently does the district administration do to support PLC?	Q1: District role Q2: Strategies

7. How is time provided for teachers to work in collaborative teams? Probe: Is the time used effectively? How do you know?	Q2: Strategies

8. How has the level of expectations changed for the staff as a result of PLC? Changed for students?	Q4: Outcomes of PLC

9. How have student outcomes changed as a result of Professional Learning Communities?	Q4: Outcomes of PLC

10. Do you feel the teachers are better equipped to provide a quality education for our students as a result of PLC? Probe: Give examples	Q4: Outcomes of PLC Q5: Staff attitudes

11. How do you feel the attitudes of the certified staff have changed as a result of Professional Learning Communities? Probe: Give examples	Q4: Outcomes of PLC Q5: Staff attitudes

Appendix

Date: _____   Start Time: _____

Introduction:

        Good afternoon and welcome. Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion about Professional Learning Communities. My name is Jim Horton, and I will serve as the moderator for today's focus group. In order to ensure accuracy I will be audiotaping the discussion. The purpose of today's discussion is to get information from you about Professional Learning Communities including the role of the district administration. You were invited because you are or have been involved in the Professional Learning Communities in some role and have some insight as to how that has affected your school.

        Please remember, there are no right or wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. If you want to follow-up on something that someone has said, you want to agree, disagree or give an example, feel free to do that. I want this to be more of a conversation among yourselves, so don't feel like you have to respond to me all of the time. I am here to ask questions, listen and make sure everyone has a chance to share. I am interested in hearing from each of you. Please speak up and remember only one person should talk at a time.

        Our session will last about an hour and we will not be taking a formal break. Feel free to leave the table for any reason if you need to. I have placed name cards in front of you to help me facilitate the discussion, but no names will be included in any reports. Let's begin by going around the room and finding out more about each other.

Date: _____   Start Time: _____

Questions	Information
1. Tell me your name, teaching area and involvement with Professional Learning Communities.	Learn about participant and PLC
2. Why did your district implement Professional Learning Communities? Probe: Test scores, failing students	Historical background of district performance
3. Describe the process used by the district to implement Professional Learning Communities.	Q1: District role Q2: Initial strategies Q3: Change readiness

4. How did the district administration support the transition to Professional Learning Communities?	Q1: District role Q2: Initial strategies

5. In what ways do you feel the district administration could provide additional support?	Q1: District role Q2: Strategies

6. What currently does the district administration do to support PLC?	Q1: District role Q2: Strategies

7. How is time provided for teachers to work in collaborative teams? Probe: Is the time used effectively? How do you know?	Q2: Strategies

8. How has the level of expectations changed for the staff as a result of PLC? Changed for students?	Q4: Outcomes of PLC

9. How have student outcomes changed as a result of Professional Learning Communities?	Q4: Outcomes of PLC

10. Do you feel the teachers are better equipped to provide a quality education for our students as a result of PLC? Probe: Give examples	Q4: Outcomes of PLC Q5: Staff attitudes

11. How do you feel the attitudes of the certified staff have changed as a result of Professional Learning Communities? Probe: Give examples	Q4: Outcomes of PLC Q5: Staff attitudes

Appendix

<u>Observation Analysis</u>

Interviewee	Key Word(s)	Theme(s)	Q1:	Q2:	Q3:	Q4:	Q5:	Date Analyzed

VITA

James Nelson Horton was born on April 26, 1952, in Springfield, Missouri, the son of James (Jack) Frances Horton and Mary Maxine Horton. James attended Immaculate Conception Elementary School and graduated from St. Agnes Regional High School, both in Springfield. James received the following degrees from Missouri State University – Bachelor of Science in Education in 1977, Masters of Science of Education in 1982, and Educational Specialist degree in 1986. He taught mathematics and physical education and coached a variety of sports for two years at Sparta High School and four years at Springfield Catholic before becoming the High School Principal for six years in the Crane R-III School District. James began his career as superintendent at Marion C. Early R-V School District for nine years followed by seven years as superintendent for the Butler R-V School District. He is currently serving in his fourth year as superintendent in the Excelsior Springs School District. James earned an EdD in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia in 2009. James has been married to Louise Ann Horton for 36 years. They have a son Adam Christopher Horton and two daughters – Rebecca Elizabeth Horton and Megan Elizabeth Ackerman, and two grandchildren – Leah Elizabeth Ann Horton and Malachi Natineal Horton.