

EXHIBIT # 3

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Peter Senge used the term “learning organization” in his 1990 best-seller, “The Fifth Discipline.” He was writing for the business community, but the term soon appeared in education literature. Thomas Sergiovanni discussed the idea of school as a learning community closely knit like a family with a shared vision. Shirley Hord in her 1997 book described a professional learning community with five characteristics:

1. Supportive and shared leadership
2. Shared values and vision
3. Collective learning and application
4. Shared personal practice
5. Supportive conditions

Alan Blankstein in his 2004 book “Failure Is Not An Option,” describes six principles for building professional learning communities:

1. Common mission, vision, values and goals
2. Ensuring achievement for all students
3. Collaborative teaming focused on teaching and learning
4. Using data to guide decision making and continuous improvement
5. Gaining active engagement from family and community
6. Building sustainable leadership capacity

In the 2005 book “On Common Ground”, Richard DuFour says that the term professional learning community has been used to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education from a grade level teaching team, to a school committee, a high school department, a whole school district, a state department of education, or a national professional organization. In this book, twelve leading authorities shared different approaches to school improvement and building professional learning communities, but ALL supported the premise that students are well served if **1)** educators embrace learning rather than teaching as the mission of their school, **2)** if they work collaboratively to help all students learn, **3)** if they use formative assessments and a focus on results to guide practice and continually improve, and **4)** if each assumes individual responsibility to take steps to create such communities.

DuFour added definition to this premise (pp. 32-42):

*Ensuring that students learn means that every professional in the school engages with colleagues in the ongoing responses to three crucial questions, “What do we want each student to learn?”, “How will we know when each student has learned it?”, and “How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?” ***He says that answering the third question separates learning communities from traditional schools.*** What often happens in traditional schools is that dealing with the struggling student is left to individual teachers who may transfer the student to a less rigorous course, recommend the child for consideration as a special education student, adopt less challenging standards for subgroups of students, look for ways to assist the child before or after school, or allow the struggling student to fail. In a professional learning community, teachers address discrepancies together and design strategies to ensure that struggling students receive additional time and support, no matter who their teacher is. In addition to being systemic and school wide, the professional learning community’s response is *timely*, (the school quickly identifies students who need more support), *based on intervention rather than remediation*, (students are provided with help as soon as they

experience difficulty rather than placed in summer school or retained), and *directive*, (instead of inviting students to get help, the plan requires students to devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastery).

*Working collaboratively shouldn't be confused with congeniality or camaraderie. The powerful collaboration that DuFour is talking about is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. It is collectively deciding how we will get to where we want to be, focused dialogue and reflection to create new knowledge and understandings. There must be an expectation that this collaborative effort will produce ongoing improvement and gains in achievement. Teachers engage in an ongoing cycle of questioning that promotes deep adult learning which, in turn, leads to higher levels of student learning.

*In focusing on results, teachers use frequent formative assessments to find out if students are learning what they need to learn. They compare each student's performance to an agreed-upon standard rather than comparing students to each other. They ask, "What evidence do we have that this practice is helping us to assist all students to achieve at high levels? Their focused discussions about results give every teacher someone to rely on, to inform instructional decisions, to develop new or different kinds of assessments and strategies for improving results. When teacher teams develop common formative assessments throughout the school year, each teacher can identify how his or her students performed on each skill compared with other students. Each teacher has access to the ideas, materials, strategies, and talents of their whole team. They embrace data on student achievement as a useful indicator of progress, stop disregarding unfavorable data, and work together to improve results rather than make excuses for them.

There are only two kinds of schools – improving schools and declining schools.

Strong professional learning communities are hard to come by but when they happen, everything in the school looks different than it did before. When teachers engage in authentic joint work focused on explicit, common, learning goals, their collaboration changes their brains as they write, observe, listen, speak, think, and learn. New habits of mind and behavior result in higher quality solutions to instructional problems, increased teacher confidence, and remarkable gains in achievement.

REFERENCES

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