What is a professional learning community?

The idea of a professional learning community (PLC) is not a new one, nor is it limited to educational organizations. For the past several decades, many for-profit companies have joined the movement to become “learning organizations,” following practices articulated by organizational change experts, including Peter Senge, whose book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990) was highly influential. Senge later wrote about adapting the learning organization model to schools in his 2000 book, *Schools That Learn*. According to Senge and others, a professional learning community is a community of practitioners committed to results and continuous improvement, where “everyone looks at outcomes, both promising and disappointing, to understand what they don’t know and to ask how they can improve their own practice and help students achieve. These groups engage in dialogue, inquiry, and reflection for the purpose of collectively constructing new meaning and knowledge that result in action.”¹ Professional learning communities have been embraced by educational organizations as a strategy that enables administrators and teachers, through collaboration and peer learning, to analyze challenges and come up with context-specific solutions to improve student achievement. As with any effective strategy to improve student achievement, professional learning communities are developed in very intentional ways. In other words, effective professional learning communities are not about building camaraderie for camaraderie’s sake. “The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement.”²

What are the benefits of professional learning communities?

Educational researchers have extensively studied professional learning communities and their effects. Not surprisingly, researchers found that having strong professional learning communities in schools led to many positive cultural changes, including reduced teacher isolation, increased peer learning, increased content knowledge, increased knowledge of effective teaching strategies, greater job satisfaction, and higher teacher retention rates.³ Researchers also found that the more schools function as professional learning communities, the greater the gains in student learning and improved teacher practice.⁴ A recent study both confirms these earlier findings and explores the distinction between the effects of a professional learning community (what the author labels “social capital” and is measured by surveys of teachers) and the effects of teachers’ individual ability (what the author labels “human capital” and is measured by teachers’ education, experience in the classroom

¹ Annenberg Institute. *Professional Learning Communities: Professional Development Strategies That Improve Instruction*
² Dufour, R. *What is a Professional Learning Community?*
³ Annenberg Institute
⁴ See, for example, Louis, K. & Marks, H. *Does Professional Community Affect the Classroom? Teachers’ Work and Student Experiences in Restructuring Schools.*
and teaching ability) on student achievement. The research findings showed that “when the relationships among teachers in a school are characterized by high trust and frequent interaction—that is, when social capital is strong—student achievement scores improve.”  

Not only did the students of teachers with both high “human capital” and high “social capital” have the largest achievement gains and the students of teachers with both low “human capital” and low “social capital” have the smallest achievement gains, but interestingly “even the low ability teachers can perform as well as teachers of average ability if they have strong social capital.” These findings suggest that a strong professional learning community is a powerful strategy for improving teacher effectiveness across the board.

**What are the defining characteristics and necessary conditions for effective professional learning communities?**

The term “professional learning community” has been widely adopted by educators to describe a variety of working relationships, such that its colloquial meaning has become fairly vague, but the characteristics of effective professional learning communities are well-defined in the research literature. At a high level, educational professional learning communities are collaborations that are characterized by trust and collegiality that are “data-informed, standards-driven, and focused on instruction, equity, and results.”

There must be several conditions in place in order to develop effective professional learning communities, including:

- supportive and shared leadership;
- shared vision;
- structures to support collaboration;
- shared accountability through shared practice and collective inquiry and creativity.

What do these conditions look like in practice? For starters, leadership in professional learning communities is distributed among the PLC members. This is not to say that formal leaders (e.g., principals, executive staff) are not involved in professional learning communities, but when formal leaders are part of a professional learning community they facilitate and participate in a culture of “peers helping peers” where shared decision-making, developing trust and fostering mutual respect are paramount. Professional learning communities require shared values and a shared vision. A shared vision among PLC members is not simply coming to agreement around a shared philosophy or strategy; “it is a particular mental image of what is important...that is developed from staffs’ unswerving commitment to students’ learning and that is consistently articulated and referenced.” It is this shared vision and shared values that lend focus to the work of professional learning communities and lead to “binding norms of behavior.”

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6 Ibid
7 Annenberg Institute. *Professional Learning Communities: Professional Development Strategies That Improve Instruction*
9 Ibid
10 Professional Learning Communities: What Are They and Why Are They Important? Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. “Issues...about change” Vol 6, Number 1.
11 Ibid
Researchers have found that certain structural conditions also need to be in place so that professional learning communities are effective and sustainable, including regular time set aside for members to meet and talk; communication systems that facilitate collaboration and learning (either physically or virtually) among members. The time set aside for communication and collaboration is critical because professional learning communities must have time and space to build the connections among members that lead to an environment of trust and honesty. Without trust and honesty it is very difficult to engage in the practice that is perhaps the hallmark of professional learning communities – the sharing and interrogating of one’s own work. Professional learning communities are different from other types of collaborations or study groups in that they “require that group members [to] reflect honestly and openly together about their own practice, intentionally seeking ways to do their work better and continually building their capacity to do so.” One pitfall of professional learning communities is the tendency to get fixated on process (e.g., establishing norms and structures for sharing practice). It is important to remember that sharing practice is not the goal in and of itself, rather it is a vehicle for learning how to work better and ultimately how to serve students better.

Professional learning communities at Breakthrough
From its beginning, Breakthrough Collaborative has fostered a shared vision of student success that embodied incredibly high expectations and focused on tangible results; created a culture that encourages honesty and risk-taking and emphasized collaboration and the development of close and trusting relationships among students, teachers and staff. In these ways, Breakthrough’s culture is particularly conducive to the development of professional learning communities. Although informal learning communities have operated throughout the history of Breakthrough (e.g., among students, among students and their teachers, among teachers and their instructional coaches), in 2009 Breakthrough began forming structured and intentional professional learning communities in the form of workgroups (i.e., groups focused on particular areas of work).

The Intern Teacher Training Initiative (ITTI) workgroup was the first of these and has several years of collaborative work under its belt. In its first year, a small group of affiliate directors convened to develop a high-quality and standardized teacher training model based on research-based practices and tailored to the Breakthrough teaching experience. After the initial training was developed and piloted, the ITTI leadership team convened to analyze the success of the pilot using student outcomes and teacher survey data. The ITTI leadership team used these data to determine which practices needed to be refined and made appropriate changes to the model for the following year. Additional Breakthrough affiliates have implemented the teacher training model each year since 2009 and the ITTI leadership team has continued to collect and analyze data and refine the model. The ITTI workgroup is the embodiment of an effective professional learning community, with its cadre of close-knit, collaborative participants who are committed to continual improvement and willingly examine their practices, both successful and unsuccessful, for the purpose of improving student outcomes and teacher preparation.

12 Launching Professional Learning Communities: Beginning Actions. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. “Issues...about change” Vol 8, Number 1.
13 Annenberg Institute. Professional Learning Communities: Professional Development Strategies That Improve Instruction
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Though the ITTI workgroup has existed the longest, several other workgroups have since taken root at Breakthrough, including the College Bound workgroup, the Curriculum Pilot Project, the Teacher Selection Experience workgroup and the Corporate Fundraising workgroup. The fact that Breakthrough has multiple workgroups operating at the same time further embeds the culture of professional learning communities throughout Breakthrough. Research shows that professional learning communities are strengthened when they are operating in multiple places and have become part of the culture of an organization. As researchers from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform found, “professional learning communities are optimized when they exist not in isolation but as part of overlapping, interconnected communities of practice... In this way, knowledge is created, shared, organized, revised and passed on within and among these communities.”\(^{14}\) It is our goal to have these interconnected communities of practice be a thriving part of Breakthrough’s culture where collaboration, learning and continual improvement are the norm.

\(^{14}\) Annenberg Institute. *Professional Learning Communities: Professional Development Strategies That Improve Instruction*
Sources:


Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. 