Building professional learning communities in high schools: challenges and promising practices

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A decade ago, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP 1996) issued an influential report on the status of America’s high schools, *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*. Professional learning communities (PLCs) formed the heart of the NASSP blueprint for high school reform: ‘every high school will be a learning community for teachers and the other professionals it employs’ and ‘each educator will create a personal learning plan’ (ibid.: 63).

Yet, despite compelling evidence about the value of a PLC, communities of practice of the stripe imagined by this blue ribbon panel remain exceptions in the landscape of American high schools – be they large, small, wealthy, poor, culturally diverse or homogeneous. For example, a survey conducted by Public Agenda in 2002 found that only one in five high school teachers said that they ‘regularly meet to share ideas about lesson plans and methods of instruction’ (Public Agenda 2002: 23). Such professional practices to support teachers’ ongoing learning and instructional improvement are rare.

At the most general level, the tasks of building and sustaining high school professional learning communities are no different from those for elementary and middle schools: creating a culture that prompts teachers to critically reflect on their practice and the infrastructure necessary to support their collective use of data to improve teaching and learning. However, high schools present particular, interrelated challenges to building and sustaining professional learning communities.
Challenges to developing high school professional learning communities

Structural impediments to teachers’ professional learning communities have received the most attention from reformers and researchers. The complex organizational structure of comprehensive high schools and subject department boundaries mitigate efforts to build whole-school learning communities (Fullan and Hargreaves 1991; Siskin and Little 1995). High school teachers’ work structure—five classes of 50 minutes and around 130 students each day—means that time for collaboration is in short supply. Paperwork, classroom management tasks, and multiple course preparations draw teachers’ time and energy away from getting to know students personally and working with colleagues on instruction. The atomic environment found in most large, comprehensive high schools undermines motivation and support for a professional learning community devoted to improving all students’ learning.

High school leadership differs in critical ways from conditions in most elementary and many middle schools. Functioning as what one high school principal dubbed “the mayor of a small city,” secondary school administrators (leaders) are hard pressed to provide instructional leadership across myriad subjects of the high school curriculum or to serve as a model for inquiry, risk-taking and professional learning.

The professional culture of high schools presents the most difficult challenge of all. Traditional norms of high school teaching—teaching subjects rather than students—shape teachers’ conceptions of their professional responsibilities and attitudes toward students. In one high school we studied, for example, when discussing the high failure rate of their students in math, teachers consistently responded with some version of “I’ve got my standards” and little empathy or sense of responsibility for students who were not successful. To this point, Public Agenda (2002: 23) found that only two in five high school teachers had “high expectations for the students and (push) them to do their very best.” Most respondents said that teachers just pass on marginal students, and one in three teachers in large high schools and one in five in small high schools said: “too many teachers are just going through the motions.”

A pervasive culture of student disrespect for teachers in America’s high schools breeds violence, cheating and discipline problems. For example, only 16 percent of students in large high schools and 22 percent in small high schools said students treat teachers with respect (Public Agenda 2002: 19). Student attitudes, combined with perceived lack of supports and resources for teaching their diverse students, depress teachers’ professional commitment and spirit. Four out of five high school teachers across high schools of all types say morale is low (ibid.: 23). The benefits of a PLC comprise a hard sell in such an institutional context. Lacking the experience of working in a strong school community, most high school teachers do not see student respect and motivation as tied to the professional culture of the school.

External contexts also influence professional community. High stakes accountability systems that press for immediate test score gains in literacy and mathematics affect high school teachers’ efforts to build whole-school communities. For high school teachers, though, this policy context often fosters competition among departments and exacerbates performance issues associated with students who enter high schools lacking basic literacy skills. These factors, too, create disincentives for teachers to spend time critically reflecting on practice, collaborating with colleagues across the school, or investing in professional growth. While such challenges for comprehensive high schools are well understood, the literature offers few examples of strategies and practices effective in building high school learning communities. Studies of PLC in high schools typically feature extraordinary subject departments with strong teacher leaders (McLaughlin and Talbert 2001), yet knowledge about how to develop such communities on a larger scale—across units within a school and across schools—requires studies of the rare high schools that have built school-wide learning communities. Our research on reforming high schools identified a few such schools that are the focus of this chapter. Their experiences offer evidence of practices that can change the professional culture of American high schools.

Evidence to support case studies of high school learning communities

We draw upon ten years of research on high schools involved in the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a reform initiative focused on building school-wide professional communities that use data to guide continuous improvement efforts. Our primary data source was a two-year intensive study of reforming Bay Area high schools conducted from 1999 to 2001. Here we report teacher survey data for a broad sample of 27 BASRC schools to locate high schools in relation to other grade levels on several measures of professional community and culture.

For our study of reforming high schools, we selected case study sites that had a reputation for engaging in whole-school reform; all are distinguished by their commitment to building school-wide learning community to improve student outcomes. From a pool of Bay Area high schools that met this criterion, we selected ten schools that represented a range of student demographics and organization designs and that worked with a variety of the external reform support organizations. During the two years of our
research in the ten schools, we used multiple research methods: interviews, observations, student and teacher focus groups, and a teacher survey and student record data. Based on initial data collected in all ten schools, we identified three high schools with strong learning communities for more intensive case studies.

**Locating high schools on professional community indicators**

Consistent with broader literature, high schools involved in BASRC were weaker than elementary schools on all measures of reform culture used in our study – teacher learning community, inquiry practices, and use of nontraditional student assessment instruments (see Figure 11.1). High schools were also weaker than middle schools on two of these measures, while teachers in all grade levels showed low levels of collaboration inside their classrooms.

![Diagram showing school reform culture and instruction: grade level differences](image)

**Figure 11.1** School reform culture and instruction: grade level differences

Although high schools are generally weak on measures of teacher learning community, our research on reforming high schools challenges the contention that high schools are intractable structures and fundamentally inhospitable environments for building professional learning communities. We found examples of vibrant professional learning communities, and positive responses to the institutional and normative challenges sketched above. We also saw that professional learning communities sat at the heart of high school reform and that they go hand in hand with teachers’ commitment to students.

Teacher surveys revealed considerable variation in strength of learning communities across the reforming high schools in our sample. Schools A, E, and F stand out as particularly strong teacher learning communities, on the basis of our field observations as well as survey data (see Figure 11.2). In these schools, teachers felt supported and encouraged to take risks. Teachers learned new practices, tried them in their classroom, reflected on their successes and challenges, and then shared their reflections with other teachers. Teachers also observed one another and offered feedback. They collaborated with colleagues both within and across departments and grade (year) levels. As a teacher in one school explained: ‘I’m watching people who’ve taught for years and years and years suddenly experience change – see things differently, see it in a new light, work differently, collaborate in a way that I’ve never seen work before.’

However, in schools with weaker communities, notably Schools C, D, and H, professional learning was not a collective endeavor, but rather was viewed as an individual responsibility. In turn, commitment to students was relatively weak and variable across the faculty. The school-wide community was a place where announcements were made and administrative issues were addressed. Attempts to create a stronger professional community through
required activities, like mandated use of BASRC’s cycle of inquiry protocol, resulted in ‘contrived collegiality’ instead of genuine collaboration (Hargreaves 1994). Leadership strategies and professional practices in these schools contrasted sharply with those in Schools A, E, and F and helped to illuminate the effective community-building practices we describe here.

**Locating reforming high schools on student outcome trends**

The three high schools strongest in professional learning community showed steady improvement on the state’s SAT-9 assessments over a three-year period, exceeding the slight growth trend for Bay Area high schools. Notably, all of the reforming high schools we studied outperformed the typical high school in the region, except for the school weakest in professional learning community. Our sample suggested that, despite the considerable range of professional cultures represented in our sample, reforming high schools’ efforts to increase collaboration and reflective practice were paying off in improved student achievement. The high schools most advanced in developing learning communities had been changing their professional cultures long before 1998 and most likely would show stronger gains if prior data points for SAT-9 assessments were available.

**Practices that support professional learning communities in high schools**

The high school professional learning communities in our study stood out for their commitment to use evidence of student learning and achievement gaps to focus instructional improvement efforts. Teachers in these schools shared responsibility for ensuring that all students met grade level standards in subject areas, and they worked together to design strategies, materials, and practices to achieve this goal.

Through collaboration on common work, teachers in these high schools developed new knowledge to improve their instruction and were strategic about bringing in expert support from outside the school. They reflected on their practice, individually and together, and used evidence of student learning to design and evaluate interventions to address learning differentials among student groups. Through this process, teachers created shared language and standards for their practice, within and across subjects. They sustained the evolving school culture and communities of practice by recruiting and mentoring new teachers with a focus on the school norms of learning, collaboration, and collective responsibility.

How did these school communities overcome the significant obstacles to building PLCs in high schools? Our analysis of community building in these schools highlights organizational strategies and practices that brought about change in professional culture over time.

**Developing broad leadership**

Redesigning leadership to promote PLC meant not only changing the role of the principal from business manager to instructional leader, but it also meant distributing the leadership across multiple units and actors. As one principal commented: ‘The day of principal control is gone.’ Principals effective in building and sustaining PLCs capitalized on teachers’ knowledge and expertise and were strategic about building teacher leadership. As one principal explained: ‘You have to be intuitive enough to recognize the right strengths in people and in figuring out ways to place them where they can impact whole-school change and not just classroom change.’ For example, one principal asked an experienced English teacher, who had received a great deal of literacy training and had an excellent rapport with the staff, to fill the newly created role of a school-wide literacy coach. The principal of another school set up mini-grants that allowed teachers to be in charge of projects. In another high school, the principal taptricians for a planning team that was responsible for designing and conducting training and learning study groups. In a high school structured according to a house system, the principal created ‘house leaders’ as new leadership opportunities for teachers. These strategies for expanding teacher leadership hooked teachers into reform and professional learning; they also established a leadership pipeline that supported PLCs in the face of staff or administrative turnover.

**Engaging student voices**

Expanded leadership also included students in diverse roles – as part of governing committees, as part of the school’s inquiry process, as collaborators with teacher communities working to develop reform solutions. Where student voice was more than pro forma, teachers found student perceptions and insight invaluable to their own learning and reflection. Resulting change in school culture was significant. For example, one educator told us: ‘it seemed like this kind of wildfire thing happened where the kids who were involved started just dropping by to give opinions and were pushing to get the next meeting happening.’ Students subsequently created a formal student team and students assisted in creating a bilingual tutoring and translation service that assists teachers and students during the school day. Students comment positively on their new relationships with teachers. For instance, students at one school reported feeling more connected to both adults and fellow students and felt that their involvement helped them
Developing communication and collaboration across department boundaries

In our sample of reforming high schools, departments were the primary focus of reform work, as might be expected in contemporary high schools. Teachers' survey reports on teacher learning community, inquiry practices, classroom observations and collaboration, and use of reform assessments vary more between departments within school than between schools (see Table 11.1). This is particularly the case for instructional reform practices and teacher collaboration in classrooms. The data also indicate that schools vary in the extent to which they set conditions for learning community development both within and across departments, seen earlier in Figure 11.1 as school differences in overall strength of community. Schools that developed broad teacher learning community did so in part by engendering cross-department communication and teacher collaboration.

Table 11.1 Locus of differences in teaching practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School reform culture</th>
<th>Subject effect</th>
<th>Department effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher learning community</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to students</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observations and collaboration</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reform instruction</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student discourse and reflection</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>Reform assessments format</td>
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<td>Reform outcomes</td>
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Notes:
* Mathematics (→)
** Controlling for school and subject
to gripe about something that is going wrong." These conversations also led teachers to see themselves as responsible for all of the school's students. As a teacher described the change at her school: "People aren't just competing for their departments, they're competing for the kids. It's like "our kids," it's not like "my department's kids.""

Teacher presentations boosted teachers' sense of professionalism and community:

We actually had teachers from this campus give small seminars ... that's really validating for teachers in general because we pay lots of money for these people to come in and talk at us when we have a lot of people on campus who are doing [great] things that they can share with us ... that makes more of a teaching community.

A teacher in another high school likewise described the contributions of internally led professional development: "One of the ways I've seen growth in this school is simply in the in-service. I've noticed that the best presentations that I've been to and the things I've learned the most from ... it's been the people that we already have here, it's no longer the people outside that I'm learning from." A focus on developing teacher expertise within the school bolstered teachers' sense of professionalism, pride in their school, while also helping the school create a sustainable school-wide professional learning community.

Developing common language and purpose through inquiry

When teachers from different departments are brought together, they often think that they have little, if anything, to talk about. With different textbooks, assessments, and curricula, the language of one department can be completely foreign to another. For schools making progress in whole-school reform, a structured process of inquiry created a bridge and professional community among the different disciplines. As one reform coordinator stated: "Why collect data? Because you get information about our school's skills and because it binds us together as a whole staff. It gives us a common language and experience. I hear teachers say: "I have a way to talk to people now."

In addition to providing teachers with a common language, inquiry also helped teachers understand how school-wide reform work pertains to their discipline and how they could benefit from being part of a school-wide professional community. For example, several high schools chose a school-wide effort focused around literacy. At first, disciplines other than English struggled to understand how this focus pertained to their work. By correlating test scores and grades, teachers realized that literacy affected student achievement across disciplines. One science teacher told us how his attitudes toward students and his instruction were transformed by learning that the disappointing student performance he attributed to student apathy instead reflected the fact that many could not read the 10th grade science material. Math teachers also saw that students with low literacy skills performed poorly in their classes. As the reform coordinator explained: "I heard the math chair say something to the effect that their reading scores had a lot to do with performance in math. And I think they're convinced of that." This common language and purpose laid the groundwork for growing a school-level PLC.

Finding time

Joint work takes time. Faculty in reforming high schools found time by changing their work structure and dedicating time for collaboration. One school received a state waiver to make Wednesday a half day so they could spend a block of time focused on creating a new curriculum. Another high school used a delayed Friday schedule — also by state permission — to pursue their work on standards. Yet another moved to a block schedule as a way to support student learning and their PLC. The BASRC Summer Institute provided time that teachers considered essential for their work around standards, inquiry into student learning and curriculum revision — the "stuff" of a professional learning community. As one teacher described the benefits of the Summer Institute:

When you're teaching through the week, you're just scrambling with courses, grading — and then you have an after school meeting. It's not the time to say "here's some really new concepts that you're going to have time to talk out, reflect on, think about and start implementing".

"In the Summer Institute we're free of the stresses of teaching; we don't have the students for those four weeks. And so the structure of having it in summer time, the relaxation, the collegiality all work together to form a real positive experience for us. We're more willing to accept each other then if we had an after school meeting and had to get ready for tomorrow's classes."

Basing school decisions on evidence

If a shared mission and common vision for student learning brought teachers together in a PLC, evidence-based inquiry into connections between practices and student learning provided the engine that motivated and deepened teachers' reform work and community. High schools deepening reform through their PLCs became sophisticated about using data to evaluate practice and focus improvement efforts. One teacher community
narrowed its focus to Latino males, for example, in an effort to better understand the disturbing trends in achievement and retention their data revealed.

In several schools, inquiry work resulted in accountability being expressed within the school and PLCs — not just in external measures such as the SAT-9. Teachers used disaggregated data and their own local measures such as writing assessments to set performance benchmarks for specific groups of students; instruction in key subjects formed the basis for internal standards accepted by both high school teachers and students. The result, according to one teacher: "It’s focusing them [students] more and they’re seeing more work and doing better work. And if they’re not able to do it, they go back and do it again because there’s no way around it." In these instances, standards built a strong and new culture of accountability among high school students.

Internal standards also fostered greater accountability among teachers. As one department chair explained:

Having the benchmarks that students have to meet in order to go on to the next grade changes the way students view assignments as well as how I view an assignment. It’s changed the way things are working in my classroom as far as student work and how I’m able to make the curriculum. I think this has improved things. In both directions — from the teachers’ and the students’ perspective.

Another teacher expressed a similar message: "I think that makes you think about what you’re teaching. Instead of just handing out the same things year after year, you’re saying: ‘that’s not going to work real well with that benchmark, so what do I need to do to be more successful?’" In this sense, internal accountability and the situated professional learning it promoted reinforced one another through connections to teachers’ day-to-day work. Internal standards were both the product of professional learning community and the basis for its critical reflection.

Using external resources and supports
Each of these reforming high schools took direction and momentum from an outside support provider — the Coalition of Essential Schools, the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, Joint Ventures of Silicon Valley. One had consent decree money in addition to BASRC resources to support their professional learning community. Teachers and leaders at each school asserted that their reform efforts and professional learning communities could not have got underway or achieved what they did without an external agent and these extra funds. This was particularly true in large high schools where professional politics were rampant and teacher reform support uneven. A school-site reform coordinator highlighted the importance of an outside perspective:

Because our support providers are from the outside, they can say things we can’t say. They don’t have an agenda other than getting the work done and doing what’s best for kids. They know where the school needs to go; they are personable and non-threatening people and such good facilitators that everybody knows and likes them. They have just been able to get in here and push and do things that people involved here couldn’t do.

However, we also saw that identifying and engaging quality support providers presented a particularly acute problem for high schools. In the Bay Area, there was no ‘directory’ they could consult to identify support providers to meet their needs. Further, all high schools struggled to locate effective content support providers; their needs far outstripped supply.

Dollars associated with these outside reform initiatives paid for supports vital to the development and functioning of professional learning communities: summer institutes, support providers, reform coordinators, and assistance with inquiry. Teacher time made available with these funds was, in the view of most faculties, the most important resource of all. The principal of a high school whose strong teacher community reform successfully spearheaded its reform effort said:

The main ingredient in school reform, in my opinion, is being able to buy teacher time to actually do the processing, to do the work. The funding from BASRC allows us to do that. At first, I was kind of concerned about how much money we were spending on people. Now, I don’t think we spend enough on people. That’s where it is, where the money makes a difference. It allows us to have summer planning, to do the retreats, to buy release periods. The kinds of things that get people really engaged. I tell schools who come to visit us, ‘If you guys are really interested in change, talk to your superintendent and your Board about finding the funding to buy time. Because without time, it isn’t going to happen.’

Managing turnover to sustain professional learning communities
Teacher and administrator turnover presents huge difficulties at all school levels in terms of consistency of practice, school environment and supports for instruction. This study of reforming high schools shows how a strong professional learning community can provide a rudder in turbulent times and that turnover is not necessarily a bad thing. In reforming high schools with a strong sense of mission and culture, turnover often signified the ‘pushing out’ of people opposed to change. It also presented opportunities
to hire people who supported the school's vision and were both willing and able to participate in the reform work. One principal explained that he wanted to hire people who: 'are used to this introspection, sharing, what have you, and so, the majority of the people that I've hired are people who are by very nature collaborative.' A reform coordinator explained: 'When people get hired right now, he's [principal] telling them, 'If you don't want to collaborate, and if you don't want to work on standards-based work, this is not the place for you.''' Thus, for several of our case study schools, turnover provided the opportunity to build and sustain a stronger professional learning community.

Conclusion

This research provides evidence that comprehensive high schools are not intractable and that the kinds of change imagined by National Association of Secondary School Principals can occur in 'typical' high schools. The high school learning communities we studied were not merely 'doing reform'; they were 'doing high school differently.' Department boundaries softened or disappeared; teachers' practice became more student centered – teaching something to somebody. Inquiry and evidence about practice grounded discussions about student learning and needed change. For these high schools, broadening leadership, situating professional learning within the school community, and developing improved uses of data and internal accountability systems were a product of, as well as necessary conditions for, changing the school's culture in ways that motivated and enabled professional learning communities to thrive.

Notes

1 We find that students' school experiences and attitudes mirror their teachers' professional culture. In one study, we observed a correlation of 0.8 between student ratings of teacher-student respect in the school and teacher ratings on measures of teacher learning community (CRCT 2002).

2 The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) was founded in 1996 with an Annenberg Challenge Grant and matching funds from the Hewlett Foundation. During its first five years, BASRC supported the reform work of 86 schools spread across the region's five counties; since 2001 it has focused on district system reform, working with 26 Bay Area districts, with funding from the Hewlett Foundation and several other local foundations. In 2003 BASRC changed its name to Springboard Schools and began to work with districts across the state on a fee-for-service basis.

3 California's assessment system changed several times during the period 1995-

References


