PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES:  
A Way of Thinking

A Way of Thinking: What Does This Mean?

In my September e-mail regarding the research supporting the concepts and practices of professional learning communities, I emphasized the point that the professional learning community concept is not a program or an initiative, but a way of thinking about consolidating "best practices" into a rational, logical approach to education. While I think this is an easy concept to grasp, perhaps it is a little more difficult to connect a way of thinking to the real, day-to-day world of what goes on in schools and classrooms.

Four Principles for Problem Solving

The White River School District is a busy place! Schools, teams and individual teachers are constantly grappling with a myriad of topics and issues. We are constantly tackling complex issues in an attempt to be more effective.

As we deal with various issues, it is helpful to keep four operating principles in mind. This way of thinking can help us be more effective in our work, but also more efficient.

First, Build a "Guiding" Coalition

Most of the issues we are tackling in the White River District are complex, with few simple answers (or even "right" ones). We are simply asking ourselves; is there a better way. For example, is there a better way of thinking about grading, homework or scheduling?

It is virtually impossible for an entire faculty to have effective dialogue, initially, about these kinds of issues. There are simply too many people involved—each with their own background, experiences and opinions. We end up talking at each other and at best end up averaging opinions. As Bob Eaker reminded us when he was here, there is a big difference between "co-laboring" and "co-blabbering". A large group is ill-suited for building consensus.

It is usually preferable to start with a few staff members who can begin to address the topic or issue in a more business-like and rational approach. Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, (2005) in a comprehensive study of effective school leadership, concluded that the creation of a guiding coalition or leadership
team is a critical step in the complex task of leading a school. By beginning with a smaller group it is easier to build consensus with the entire faculty later.

Building Shared-Knowledge

Nowhere is the term “a way of thinking” more applicable than with the idea that the first step a group should take, after clearly defining the issues, is to gain shared knowledge. When a school (or team, or group) functions as a professional learning community, members attempt to answer questions and resolve issues by first building shared knowledge. In other words, members of a learning community learn together. A major cultural shift that occurs when a school begins functioning as a professional learning community is moving from averaging opinions about issues to gaining shared knowledge.

The best way to think of gaining shared knowledge is to think of it as seeking out best practices. For example, if we are trying to improve the way we assign or grade homework, we would first seek out best homework practices—practices that are having a positive impact on student learning. This doesn’t necessarily mean studying research. Although, research findings are an important aspect of gaining shared knowledge, best practices may be found within our own school or in a neighboring school within the district. Best practices may be found in articles or books. Best practice may be found in the classroom next door. Think of it like this; in professional learning communities, groups seek to learn.

A Culture of Experimentation

Simply learning about effective practices will do little to improve a school unless we are willing to try them out. A willingness to try new approaches is a significant aspect of thinking in a professional learning community. Simply put, we won’t know unless we try. This requires a willingness to move beyond the status quo. However a word of caution is in order. We must avoid the “Yeah, but…” syndrome. There is usually an obvious downside to any new initiative. If we refuse to try things because they may not be perfect, we’ll never try anything. The attainable goal is not perfection, but to be better. The culture of a school that functions as a professional learning community is one of continuous improvement, incrementally, over time. This only happens if we are willing to close the knowing-doing gap and experiment with new ideas.

A Focus on Results

Often people are reluctant to try new ideas because they are fearful that if things aren’t better (or even worse) they will be stuck with them. This is a legitimate concern. In the White River School District we must make a commitment that when we experiment with new ideas or approaches, we will assess the effectiveness of our changes and be willing to make adjustments, or try something else. A failed initiative can be a good thing if handled correctly. By thoughtfully analyzing
what has happened and why it happened, we can learn many things that will be beneficial in the future.

In analyzing the effectiveness of our efforts, we must ask the right question. That question is this; how is this initiative affecting student learning and our mission to ensure high levels of learning for all students who attend White River schools. This may seem obvious, but it is very easy to slip into the habit of first asking the question, “How do we like it?” While we should not be insensitive to our preferences, we must align our focus on results with the essential goals we are working towards.

**A White River Example**

For the last year or so there has been interest in the issue of “grading practices”. I think this is a partly a result of the presentations that many of our staff heard at the Ken O’Connor workshop, the Professional Learning Communities Institute in Seattle in August and the recent Rick Wormeli training. Bob Eaker also talked of this issue with the elementary and middle school faculty when he was here in August.

There are few topics more emotional than grading and report cards. We all have our strong views on the subject. Yet, we would have to agree it is an important topic and one in which we could definitely improve our professional practice. The issue is how to think of this issue in a rational, logical and effective way.

Having the entire school faculty address this topic can be problematic, at best. It may prove more effective to have a guiding coalition tackle the issue first. Their charge should be clearly defined should be to first gain shared knowledge and learn about best grading practices. Of course, these will vary depending on grade levels, disciplines, etc. There is no one best grading practice.

After learning, analyzing and discussing, the task force should periodically update the faculty on their work, sharing what they are learning. They should engage in a deep, professional dialogue and listen deeply to faculty concerns and questions.

As a result of thoughtful analysis, discussion and reflection the group can recommend to the administration and faculty that they implement some select changes. It is important to share with the larger group how the effects of the “experiment” will be monitored and how adjustments will be considered. During this process the group would continue to gather research and input, implement changes in report cards and gradebooks and begin collecting evidence on how grading is impacting students.
This way of thinking can prove to be more effective than simply “throwing it open” in a faculty meeting.

Where Do We Go From Here?

As I mentioned earlier, there is so much going on within our district. It is exciting and complex work. But, it is worthwhile and it is making a huge difference. As we approach various issues and topics, ranging from grading and homework, to scheduling and giving students additional time and support, it will be helpful if we keep in mind that the quality of what we do will be determined, to a great extent, by how we think and how we act. What I have shared in this e-mail is merely one way of thinking about connecting best practices into a rational, logical approach to ensure that we stretch the aspirations and performance levels of all of us within the White River School District—students and adults alike.

As always, I welcome and value your thoughts, comments, ideas, and suggestions. Let me again say thank you for working so hard to make White River a special place for all of us—students, faculty and staff and parents and our entire community.

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