

## Literature Synopsis:



**Professional Learning Communities:  
A Literature Synopsis**  
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### Introduction

Over the past five years, emphasis on the importance of Alberta schools operating as professional learning communities has steadily increased. The Alberta Learning Commissions recommendation # 13, *Requires every school to operate as a professional learning community (PLC) dedicated to continuous improvement in students' achievement*. School jurisdictions have acknowledged this expectation for Alberta schools. Learning communities are a method for the organization and operation of schools that will best meet the academic needs of students entrusted to our care.

A school cannot become an effective professional learning community in a short amount of time. It is a process that may take several years. In fact, in the spirit of continuous learning, the learning community concept challenges schools to work to improve on an ongoing basis. Similarly, it is no easy task for a school to establish a collaborative culture in which all members share responsibility for improved student learning. Moreover, it is important to remember that there is no one way to establish a professional learning community, as each school faces its own unique challenges (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). However, as the following sections of this document will attempt to show, the academic and social gains that can be achieved when schools are able to function in close accordance with the principles of a learning community are worth the effort.

Without question, Alberta educators strive to ensure that all students receive the best possible educational experience. As more schools experience *reculturing* (Fullan, 2001), and are better able to link the critical elements of curriculum, instruction, assessment and learning to a more coherent understanding of professional practice, more educators are experiencing greater success in their work.

The period from 1998-2005 has seen a dramatic expansion in literature and research about the learning community as a key element of effective school improvement. For many Alberta educators, the learning community movement began with DuFour and Eaker (1998) whose text, *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, has been one of the most widely disseminated books in recent educational history. This movement has continued relentlessly since then and must certainly rank as one of the most compelling changes ever to be adopted by the Alberta education system.

### Groundwork

According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), all work towards professional learning communities comprises potentially difficult tasks. Communities must be based on environments built on trust, effective communication, clear goals and objectives, with strong and sure administrative support, before much productive work can be accomplished (Riley & Stoll, 2004; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Sullivan & Glanz, 2006). Many authors advise that, before proceeding with any type of discussion about becoming a professional learning community, members of school communities need to ascertain their existing levels of readiness, through the use of such tools as surveys and rubrics (Berlinger-Gustafson, 2004; Hord,

Meehan, Orletsky & Sattes, 1999; Lambert, 2003). It is important that these preliminary stages not be rushed. The development of a solid foundation from which to build is critical. It is also important that time be taken for staff and others to explore their own personal vision and values for themselves before they can authentically contribute to the work of the organization (Barth, 1990).

An effective tool that can be used to assess the current state of readiness of a school is *Exploring Your Learning Community* (Townsend & Adams, 2003).

### **Shared Mission, Vision, Values, Goals**

The four pillars of an effective learning community are mission, vision, values and goals. The mission should be an inspirational, concisely written statement of what the school stands for (Berlinger-Gustafson, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hulley, 2004). A school's vision statement outlines what the organization aspires to become. It should offer motivation and hope for a community that is working towards attaining an ideal (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2005). Value statements outline what the community members are committed to in order to ensure school improvement (Barth, 1990; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman, 2003; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2005). Several authors promote the use of SMART goals (strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound) as one vital strategy for moving forward (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001; Hulley, 2004). While it is important for as many members of the community as possible to be involved in developing mission, vision, values and goals, it is equally important that they be engaged in continuous revisiting of these pillars as they participate in the process of becoming a professional learning community (Harris & Hadfield, 2003; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Such reflection must become part of community members' everyday interactions.

### **Leadership**

School leadership is pivotal in determining the success of school improvement efforts (Leithwood, 2002). Leaders have to think about sustainability of initiatives so that the more productive culture that has evolved can be supported and maintained regardless of changes in administrative leadership in the organization (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003). "The main mark of an effective principal is not just his or her impact on the bottom line of student achievement, but also on how many leaders he or she leaves behind who can go even further" (Fullan, 2005, p. 31).

In schools, the principal is the lead learner (Hulley, 2004). However, leadership within a professional learning community must be shared with teachers so that meaningful and lasting change can occur (Chrisman, 2005; Hopkins, 2001; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Sullivan & Glanz, 2006). When leadership is shared among teachers and other community members, they will feel more ownership of and commitment to decisions and actions (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Barth, 1990). Active participation in collaborative teams broadens the opportunity for teachers and others to become involved as leaders (Barth, 1990; Fullan, 2005; Glanz, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Lambert, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2005).

### **Collaboration**

In a professional learning community the focus shifts from the individual to the group (Sackney & Mitchell, 2001). Teacher isolation is lessened as educators share collective knowledge, methods and successes to foster the growth of a successful learning community (Schmoker, 2004; Supovitz & Christman, 2005). Time for collaboration should be embedded in the hours of the regular school day (Chrisman, 2005; DuFour, 2004; Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Glanz, 2005; Little, 2002; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003).

## Action Orientation

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Karhanek (2004) explain that professional learning communities are action-oriented in that they “turn aspirations into actions and visions into reality” (p. 4). Most authors caution that while it is wise to move slowly at some stages, it is imperative that schools *move forward* as they try to take on more of the characteristics of learning communities. Successful schools engage in both formal and informal action research (Chrisman, 2005). Action research is a cyclical process that comprises variations of inquiry and reflective practice. For example, Glanz (1998, as cited by Skytt & Couture, 2000) outlines the following steps:

1. Select a focus
2. Collect data
3. Analyze and interpret data
4. Take Action

Movement through these different stages of research should be timely, and the process should be regularly revisited, so that learning will result (Joyce, 2004). Action research directs teachers towards a process of reflection, refinement, and improvement of teaching (Glanz, 2005; Sullivan & Glanz, 2006). It requires that team members must work together as they experiment and take risks with the support of one another (Barth, 1990; Sackney & Mitchell, 2001).

## Collective Inquiry/Continuous Improvement

Sergiovanni states that “learning communities are communities of inquiry” (1994, p. 144). The focus is on learning rather than teaching, not just the learning of students, but the learning of teachers as well (Hulley, 2004; Sackney & Mitchell, 2001). Learning is the fundamental purpose of schools (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Hopkins, 2001; Sullivan & Glanz, 2006). Collective inquiry must be data-driven and research-based in order for it to support the achievement of community goals (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2001; Lezotte & McKee, 2002). When members of a school community understand that learning must be their primary purpose, then they will be on their way to creating a learning community (Haberman, 2004; Riley & Stoll, 2004). In professional learning communities, inquiry and learning are continuous. “A process of school improvement cannot be seen as an event. The conditions in and around the school are changing constantly and school staff must have a mindset of continuously improving outcomes” (Hulley, 2004, p. 2). The quest for improvement, for both students and adults, provides unlimited opportunities for growth. Lezotte and McKee (2002) point out that the more a school improves the more school community members will see the need to improve.

## Best Instructional Practices

“Teachers in professional learning communities are constantly seeking out ‘best practices’” (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). Conzemius and O’Neill (2001) suggest that teachers should begin their learning process by reflecting on the best practices that they already incorporate into their teaching. They should then identify the practice that they would like to know more about and use that as a starting point for research. This research can be done *as part of* effective professional development, in which delivery of information about teaching skills is shared and studied, rather than merely transmitted (Joyce, 2004; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Members of school communities should make every effort to become more aware of the effective instructional practices already happening within their own building and capitalize on those proven techniques (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2004) before seeking external expertise. One valuable way to do this is through the establishment of effective mentoring programs which can enable many different groups of people to learn from each other (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003).

## Meaningful Assessment

Assessment must be timely, occur regularly, and offer a broader sense of student achievement than traditional testing (Hopkins, 2001; Lezotte & McKee, 2002). In an effective school, student progress is measured frequently through a variety of assessment procedures. The results of these assessments are used to improve individual student performance and also to improve the instructional program (Hulley, 2004). Earl (2002) states that when teachers collaborate to develop common assessment tools, there will be fewer assessment discrepancies among classes. DuFour and Eaker (1998) advise that alternative assessment strategies should be examined and developed to ensure the most accurate records of student achievement are available to all. All assessment tools are means of assisting educators in identifying what they must do to help those students who have not yet acquired essential skills, knowledge, and attitudes. In addition schools must develop plans that can be put in place as soon as it becomes apparent that any students are struggling with their learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004).

## Celebration

To nurture a shared vision and promote the achievement of community objectives, members are encouraged to celebrate the accomplishments of their learning community (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). It is important to celebrate milestones because that helps to refocus and reenergize the group and remind the learning community members that the school is serious about its goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2005; Lambert, 2003; Lezotte & McKee, 2002). Schmoker (2004) explains that teachers are most effective when their efforts are recognized and shared. He is one of many authors who advise schools to make more conscious efforts to celebrate the successes of both teachers and students. As DuFour and Eaker (1998) suggest, celebration is everyone's responsibility.

## Annotated Bibliographies

DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

This book offers a detailed and easy to understand account of many of the fundamental aspects of professional learning communities. It was written primarily for educational leaders. Richard DuFour is the former superintendent of Adlai Stevenson High School District 125 in Lincolnshire, Illinois and the former principal. Richard Eaker is the former executive vice-president and provost at Middle Tennessee State University and former fellow with the National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development. In this text they outline the sort of work that must initially be done to best establish a school culture in which collaboration, inquiry, action orientation and experimentation can lead to continuous improvement. In addition to a selection of sample questions that can be asked of a school staff, the book contains several checklists that can serve as checkpoints for the progress that schools and individuals are making as they work collaboratively towards operating as professional learning communities. This book is organized into chapters complete with bold printed subtitles and list items for quick reference. Because it was written in the United States, some aspects of the book, such as information regarding curriculum, and some perspectives on school leadership, are not completely relevant in Canada. While Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker make several references to other research that has been done in the areas of learning communities, much of what they offer as recommendations is based on the successes they have witnessed themselves in schools.

Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership and sustainability: system thinkers in action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press & Toronto, ONT: Ontario Principals' Council.

Former Dean of Ontario's Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto and current Special Advisor on Education to the Premier and Minister of Education in Ontario, Michael Fullan explains how "New Theoreticians" can become leaders for sustainability by becoming system thinkers in action. Written for policy makers and practitioners, the book is peppered with references to literature and research from Australia, Canada, England and the United States. Fullan contends that "one core goal of this book is to identify ideas and strategies that will promote systems thinking (and that) systems thinking in practice, is the key to sustainability" (p. 43). His *Eight Elements of Sustainability* may be comparable to some models for developing professional learning communities. However, Fullan describes professional learning communities as only one component of his Eight Elements system, claiming that professional learning communities are necessary but not sufficient for sustainability. This resource offers a challenge to the notion that learning communities will help solve many of the big problems our schools must face.

Lambert, L. (2003). *Leadership capacity for lasting school improvement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

International consultant and professor emeritus of California State University, Linda Lambert writes to principals, and teachers as leaders, about engaging in leadership within the learning community. Based on research done in the United States and Canada, the book promotes collaboration in teacher teams, and describes "high leadership capacity schools (as) excellent learning communities because they enjoy most of the same features including shared vision, inquiry, reflective practice and collective responsibility" (p. 36). The book contains several graphic organizers for understanding of key concepts as well as questions and activities for reflection and practice at the end of each chapter. There is a useful appendix with staff/school surveys, evaluation and assessment tools and rubrics of teacher leadership. This is a useful guide to support principals and teachers as they seek to develop and sustain leadership for student learning within their professional learning communities.

Roberts, S. M. & Pruitt, E. Z. (2003). *Schools as professional learning communities: Collaborative activities and strategies for professional development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Dr. Sylvia Roberts, professor and head of the Programs in Educational Administration and Supervision at the City College of New York and Dr. Eunice Pruitt, educational consultant and Director of Professional Development for Corn Associates, have provided a practical guide for educators to use as they transform themselves and their schools into learning communities. The authors offer strategies and ideas for implementation of learning communities through effective leadership and collaboration of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and others in the community. Several case studies are used to illustrate how problems can be overcome using the strategies suggested. Tips and activities are provided throughout as the authors try to demonstrate how their ideas can be applied in other settings. It is a useful guide that provides support to leaders, both as teachers and administrators, in their quest to improve student learning.

Townsend, D., & Adams, P. (2004). *Action research in Chinook's edge school division: Tracking the journey to a learning community*. Innisfail, AB: Chinook's Edge School Division #73.

David Townsend and Pamela Adams, professors in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, have spent considerable time working with Alberta schools on action research and learning communities. This document summarizes the purposeful and systematic process of establishing an effective learning community within the Chinook's Edge School Division. While it is generally understood that there is no one best way to achieve a professional learning community, the details which are outlined in this report go a long way in helping educators understand the processes involved in achieving sustainable success. This document provides historical perspectives and models of action research, and shows how action research was used to accomplish the goals of this Chinook's Edge project. It also provides tables, charts, and evaluation procedures used to measure that success. In addition, it contains comments and perspectives from stakeholders who participated in the "journey", adding further insights into what was learned and accomplished through this experience. Anyone interested in establishing a professional learning community could benefit from the insights, experience, strategies, and expertise gained by the group of professionals who learned much through this process and have been willing to share what they learned.

Sullivan, S. & Glanz, J. (2005). *Building effective learning communities: Strategies for leadership, learning, & collaboration*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Susan Sullivan, Chair of the Department of Education College of Staten Island, the City University of New York, and Jeffrey Glanz, Dean of Graduate Programs and Chair of the Department of Education at Wagner College in Staten Island, New York, have written a book that helps aspiring and current leaders learn the skills and inclinations needed to create collaborative learning communities where high academic standards are attained by all members of the school community. The first section of the book provides materials for prospective and practicing leaders to learn about and develop themselves. Section two presents a variety of techniques and strategies to help build a reflective learning community, or develop community members as a group. Both sections demonstrate the importance of contemplative professional development through the use of thoughtful questions. This text is user-friendly, and includes blank templates that can be used for a variety of professional development activities. The authors recommend the following texts to help educators further understand what they can do to improve their schools and their professional practice: *Reflective Practice for Educators* (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004); *The Constructivist Leader* (Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, & Szabo, 2003); *Communicating in Small Groups* (Beebe & Masterson, 2000); *The Power of Protocols* (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003); *Schools That Learn: The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education* (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000); *Schools as Professional Learning Communities* (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003); *Finding Your Leadership Style* (Glanz, 2002); and *Let Me Learn* (Johnston & Dainton, 1997).

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### Additional Resources

#### Books

Hulley, W., & Dier, L. (2005). *Harbours of Hope*. Burlington, ON: Canadian Effective Schools.

#### On-line Resources

Action Research at Queens University

Provides other links to helpful resources.

<http://educ.queensu.ca/~ar/>

Alberta's Commission on Learning

Turning vision into reality: Developing professional learning communities.

[http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/commission/5\\_11.asp](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/commission/5_11.asp)

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development = ASCD

[http://pdonline.ascd.org/pd\\_online/new/course\\_description.cfm?sid=64](http://pdonline.ascd.org/pd_online/new/course_description.cfm?sid=64)

### Chinook's Edge School Division

Shows the process of becoming and maintaining a professional learning community from an Alberta perspective.

<http://www.chinooksedge.ab.ca/>

### Project on Faculty Learning Communities (FLC)

Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio  
Most recent links with over 300 references (Global)

<http://www.units.muohio.edu/flc/>

### National Leadership Institute

Building and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities

[http://www.setda.org/Toolkit2004/professionaldevelopment\\_02\\_Building\\_Sustaining\\_Professional\\_Learning\\_Communities.htm](http://www.setda.org/Toolkit2004/professionaldevelopment_02_Building_Sustaining_Professional_Learning_Communities.htm)

### National Staff Development Council (NSDC)

<http://www.nsd.org/>

<http://www.nsd.org/standards/learningcommunities.cfm>

### REL Network (Regional Educational Laboratories) - Research Based School Reform

This site provides links to 8 separate educational regions in the United States with several resources for educators interested in action research and professional learning communities.

<http://www.relnetwork.org/>

## **International Sites**

### Australia – School Excellence Initiative

<http://activated.decs.act.gov.au/sei/profLearn/>

### UK - Effective Professional Learning Communities (EPLC)

<http://www.eplc.info/>

### UK- National College for School Leadership

<http://www.ncsl.org.uk/>

## **Videos**

### *Let's Talk About Professional Learning Communities: Getting Started*

Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, Rebecca DuFour (2004)

Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service

This package contains three videos, each between 30 – 40 minutes long. The first video is based on mission, vision, values, and goals, the second video is about collaboration, while the third centers on the topic of leadership. Viewers hear conversations between Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, Rebecca DuFour and Dennis Sparks, while they share their views and answer questions related to each of the designated topics.

*Through New Eyes: Examining the Culture of Your School*

Richard DuFour (2003)

Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service

This package contains a 30 minute video as well as a facilitator's guide. The easy to follow guide will walk presenters through the process of leading a staff through the viewing of this video. While this video is not very engaging, it does offer a great springboard for discussion about the culture that is already present in schools, as well as the type of culture that would be desirable to create.

*How to Develop a Professional Learning Community: Passion and Persistence*

Richard DuFour (2002)

Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service

This is a very brief yet powerful video. In 7 minutes it sends clear messages for members of aspiring learning communities to think about. This is a simple video with messages appearing on the screen while music plays in the background.

*Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*

Richard DuFour & Robert Eaker (1999)

Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service

This package contains three videos, each ranging from 20 – 25 minutes in length. Part one shares information about mission, vision, values, and goals, while parts two and three discuss collaborative teams engaged in collective inquiry and the process of changing a school's culture. While these videos appear quite dated in terms of the footage that is used, they are useful in that real teachers and students share their views in support of professional learning communities. These videos offer a summary of key points that can be found in the book by the same name. Sections of these videos could be used to generate discussion among staff.