A Professional Learning Community Journey

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We are four staff members at Agnes Macphail Public School, an elementary school in the north-east area of Scarborough. We are fortunate to have extremely motivated and well-behaved students, supportive parents, and talented colleagues who enjoy working together. Our standardized testing scores are admirable and we have a tradition of academic excellence. For the past three years, we have been working to establish a professional learning community framework at our school, similar to some of the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) schools, which are those identified by the province's Ministry of Education as not achieving significant improvements. You may wonder, "If it ain't broke, why fix it?" If we are not required to take these extra steps, why proceed on this particular journey? The simple answer is that we believe it is the most promising strategy for sustaining school improvement. Professional learning communities provide good professional development for all teachers; the beginning teachers receive in-house mentoring and the experienced teachers also have lots to offer and to gain. When teachers work together in professional learning communities, they share best practices and evaluation / assessment methods, ensuring fairness and consistency between individual classes and grades. The intense lobbying that occurs in June by some parents to have their child in one class instead of another becomes a moot point, because the similarities in program delivery negate the need to be choosy in the instructor.

This Professional Learning Community journey did not start overnight. Starting in the 2005-2006 school year, common preparation time was established for some of the grade teams. This helped to promote an environment that encouraged team planning and teaching.

In the following school year, 2006-2007, common preparation time was established for all grade teams. It was in this school year that our first
Professional Learning Community block was embedded in the timetable. This was done through the primary classes pairing up with a junior class as reading buddies. As a result, for one period (40 minutes) every other week, the teachers in each division (primary and junior) were able to meet together as a Professional Learning Community. For the intermediate division, their PLC block occurred when their students attended the Design and Technology program at another school.

We were quite content with how things were progressing, but our contented stroll into professional learning communities had a very exciting twist in the road. The turning point came when the four of us attended a spring summit given by Solution Tree about the fundamentals of professional learning communities, presented by the Dufours, the gurus of the field. At the time, one of us was away on maternity leave and when our principal called to ask if she'd attend the summit, as Jenny says: "My first thought was 'WHAT!!!!!' After considering that Priscilla [our principal] would not ask me lightly and knowing that she always has the school's best interest at heart, I agreed. It was a great decision I made." The summit was an enlightening experience to say the least. We started to realize the potential of what PLC had to offer and we were so excited. It wasn't just another "initiative" that was being promoted by the "powers that be", and it wasn't just a book talk, as we originally thought. It was a philosophical approach to how collaborative teaching could and should be. Through this approach, we started to see how collectively we could lessen our loads by sharing the talents of our teaching team, and we started seeing the students as not just 'my student', but 'our students'.

After coming back with this wealth of knowledge and a new vision, it was time to share it with the staff. We put together a small presentation highlighting what we felt were the key components of the new PLC model that our school needed to incorporate. It was important that as a staff, opportunities to voice concerns and to ask questions be provided. Each division met and we had an open dialogue. During this forum, members of the staff began to understand the benefits of working under this new model. There would be improved communication, a "whole school" approach to the education of all the students, a more seamless delivery of curriculum between the grades and a central focus on learning.

Our current model, in 2007-2008, involves common preparation time for all grade teams. In addition to this, a double period of Professional Learning Community meeting time is generated through class coverage provided by the support staff. This translates into 70 minutes every other week for the primary and junior divisions. Within this 70-minute time block, 20 minutes are devoted to book study and 50 minutes to collaboration. The intermediate division finds their Professional Learning Community time when the grade 7s and 8s go to another school for their Design and Technology classes. For the first time this year, the support staff (consisting of the teacher-librarian, the special education teacher and the English as a Second Language teacher) has their own 40 minute bi-monthly Professional
Learning Community time, achieved through some creative scheduling. Another new feature this year are half-day release times for all divisions at the beginning and end of the term.

At the beginning of each term, when each division had half-day release time, we worked on our term plan. The term plan consisted of determining our overall goal for the whole term and our objectives for each PLC block within that term. First of all, reading expectations were identified. Then we looked at scheduling the administration of the diagnostic, formative, and summative common assessments. We established timelines for gathering data, sharing of best practices, and teacher moderated marking. It was also important to work in a "follow-up" step for each PLC block. This helped to make sure that everyone was on the same page and moving towards our next step. At different points in time, follow-up work entailed: administering common assessments, marking and tracking common assessments, putting into practice common best practices, and reading the next chapter for our book study.

For the primary division, one goal was the sharing of best practices through the implementation of strategies from our book study of Debbie Miller. Not only do we read and discuss the strategies, but we actually try them out and share with each other what worked or what didn't work with our students. Kerri Commissio, one of our grade 2/3 teachers, commented: "The kids are really starting to think as they read because now they are tracking their thoughts through the Post It notes!" Another goal was to create common assessments which are assignments created by all members of a group that everyone agrees to use as a barometer for gauging how well students understand a concept to be taught or already taught. Through this, we have been able to develop more consistency with our teaching, as well as our assessments. Now we collectively have a common understanding and agreement of what constitutes a Level 4.

Though we've only been operating under this new model for a short period of time, we as a staff believe that there have been significant achievements. The level of vertical integration and communication between teachers have become more prominent focal points within the school. We have realized that by understanding what is happening in the grade below and in the grade above, we as teachers get a better sense of what needs to be done in order to better prepare our students for their future challenges. As teachers, our programming is more seamless. There is more divisional planning and the use of common language between the grades makes concepts more transferable. Moderated marking is also becoming more commonplace. Teachers are creating common

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1 The Ministry of Education in Ontario uses a 4-level achievement chart in its curriculum documents. Level 3 represent the "provincial standard". It is often explained as a "B" letter grade. As the curriculum documents state: "Level 1 identifies achievement that falls much below the provincial standard, while still reflecting a passing grade. Level 2 identifies achievement that approaches the standard. Level 4 identifies achievement that surpasses the standard." (page 22, The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Science and Technology Revised, 2007 [Queen's Printer for Ontario]).
assessments and evaluating together more regularly. In essence, the PLC allows us to work smarter, not harder.

To continue our journey, we need several things. Channels of communication are critical in sustaining the momentum of the PLC at Agnes Macphail P.S. During our divisional meetings, we fill out a feedback sheet and give it to the principal. She can then address our concerns or questions and everyone is kept in the loop. We also have a communications binder that was created to keep the support staff abreast of what is happening in each division. This further enhances the seamless curriculum delivery because the support staff hear about strategies, graphic organizers and common language from the regular classes that can be modified for special education students.

For professional learning communities to continue to thrive, it is also crucial for the administration to be involved and supportive. Our principal, Priscilla Yu, has created a schedule that allows for meetings within the instructional day. There’s a need for what the Dufours call a "tight-loose leadership style": being flexible in some areas and firm in other areas. It is important for the individual members to have ownership of the process. This leads to leadership from within.

Even though we are proud of our accomplishments so far, things are not perfect by a long shot. There are many challenges we still need to discuss and iron out. At the top of our list is our remediation model. Through PLC, one of our main objectives is to be able to help all of our students succeed in reaching their potential to obtain at least a Level 3. We have yet to find an effective way of giving those 'at risk' students the much needed small group time to re-teach concepts, to make modifications/accommodations to their program, or to provide the extra practice to solidify their understandings, all within our time frame. We haven't figured it out yet, but we will.

Time is a very big issue in another way. We have realized that though PLC blocks have been embedded into the schedule, more time is needed to meet outside these periods so that divisions and grade teams can remain current on what is happening within our classrooms. Currently, we are trying to establish a routine to fit into the busy schedule of a typical school week.

A third challenge was with one of our newest groupings. This was the first time we had a support staff PLC. The goals and activities of this group naturally differ from those of the classroom teachers and we needed to work on how to best support the classroom teachers and make the meeting time worthwhile for specialty teachers, despite having very different, cross-divisional, job assignments.

A day in the life of a teacher is jam packed with teaching, meeting with other teachers (and sometimes parents), marking, planning, extra-curricular activities, … the list goes on. At times, with the hectic pace of teaching, the Professional
Learning Community time blocks may appear as a hurdle, or "time taken away from getting my work done". However, what we've come to learn is that the more we collaborate and work as a team, the more efficient we become. The time you invest in a professional learning community comes back tenfold. You will definitely reap the benefits.

Teacher moderation, in which teachers gather together to agree on what constitutes a level 4, 3, 2 and 1 on a common assessment piece and collaboratively evaluate, is a challenging activity. We were fortunate to have Dr. Don Klinger from Queen's University come and do a session on common assessment. His thought-provoking presentation led to even more questions and debate and has helped inform our teaching and assessment practices. We may have him return to do a follow-up workshop in the future.

As a whole school, we are quite proud of what we have accomplished to date. Our goal of vertical integration and common language is emerging. As much as we have celebrated our successes, we also know that there is much more work to be done. In particular, at our last Literacy Committee meeting, we talked about the need to have more dialogue between the divisions: from primary to junior, and junior to intermediate. As a result, our principal is making plans to arrange for release time for the whole staff so that we can all get together and reflect on our strengths and share any concerns. Furthermore, for next year we would like to expand our literacy focus from reading to include writing. In addition to reading, we want to map a writing continuum from kindergarten to grade 8 that focuses on the different forms and purposes of writing (fiction and non-fiction). We've come to realize that there are so many opportunities and situations where best practices for reading and writing come hand in hand and we are looking forward to next year's plans in which everyone comes out a winner.

As we continue our Professional Learning Community journey, our ultimate goal is to narrow the gap from: Knowing → Doing → Being.

The future is not some place that we are going but one that we are creating.